

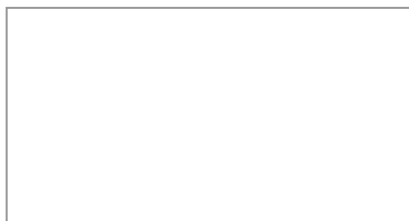


THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

THE SILENCING OF DISSENT IN THE AUSTRALIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

By Margot F. Salom

Bachelor of Arts (Social Work)



*A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy
at The University of Queensland in December 2005.*

**School of Social Science
University of Queensland**

DECLARATION

This thesis represents original research undertaken for the degree of Master of Philosophy (Research) at the University of Queensland, which was completed between 2003 and 2005. The interpretations presented in this thesis are my own and do not represent the view of any other individual or group.

.....

Signature of author

.....

Date signed

.....

Signature of Advisor

.....

Date signed

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I am completing this thesis, I am feeling some sense of loss for what has been a fulfilling and challenging experience. Through the three years of the undertaking of the requirements for this award I have had enormous support from my advisory team as well as the other people described below.

First, I must express my sincere thanks to my primary advisor, Dr. Zlatko Skrbis who from the beginning of our academic relationship has offered me a great deal of his academic knowledge and skills, as well as patience and humour. I also want to thank you Zlatko, for your insight and empathy for this sensitive topic. It has been a privilege to have worked with you. A special thanks to my associate advisor Dr. John Bradley, who has been what I like to call my Jewish ‘technical advisor’. I want to thank you John for your ongoing support in the difficult decisions that I have had to make and for introducing me and my initial project to Zlatko. Your ongoing friendship and academic experience has been a great source of encouragement to me, *Rav Todot* John.

I would like to thank all of my participants, who willingly revealed themselves as I explored the sensitive subject of ‘silencing’ in their milieu – I thank you for your honesty and trust in me and this project. It was a great pleasure to meet you all and to share with you a problem that is very dear to my heart and mind. I would like to especially thank Vivienne Porzsolt and Barbara Bloch who initially offered me the necessary help in locating the potential participants for this study. It would have been so much more difficult without your help.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the work of my editor, Chelsea Allen, who has done a great job in helping me to produce a more polished thesis. Thank you Chelsea.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of Jewish peace activists in Sydney, Australia, who actively dissent from the 'mainstream' Jewish community by expressing criticism of the oppression of the Palestinian people by various Israeli governments. Although some literature from the United States addresses the phenomenon of the silencing of dissent in the Jewish community, to date there has been very little research interest in the subject of dissent in the Australian Jewish community.

This study sought to investigate the issue of dissent in the Australian Jewish community by examining the experiences of Jewish peace activists within an ethno-religious mainstream. Respondents were drawn from two Jewish peace groups in the Sydney metropolitan area. Data was generated by means of a questionnaire, which was sent to potential respondents at the time of the initial selection process. A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews followed, based on those questions and subsequent responses.

The findings reveal that peace activists included in this research feel that there exists a subtle expectation/constraint within the Jewish community that disallows criticism of the Israeli government. Indeed, the majority of respondents revealed that they have personally experienced some form of 'silencing' of their opinions and the majority of respondents either keep silent or avoid situations that would expose their views.

This research also examines how Jewish peace activists perceive their identification as Jews in view of the attempts to silence their dissenting views. A majority of those interviewed agreed that they regard their activism as an expression of their Jewish identity and that they link their political stance with Jewish ethics related to justice and human rights.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
PREFACE	
<i>and in the beginning</i>	1
CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION	3
There is a limit	3
The state of Israel and the origins of dissent	4
Dissent, conformity and suppression: the protagonists	6
The silencing of dissent	8
<i>Organisational silencing within the Australian community</i>	10
Israel/diaspora relationship	15
Diaspora ‘homeland’ and the question of return	16
What/who is a Jew – Jewish identity: a religion or an ethnicity?	19
Research Aims.....	23
Methodological considerations	24
<i>The interviewer as ‘insider’</i>	25
<i>The interview procedure</i>	26
<i>Maintaining the distance</i>	29
<i>Ethical considerations</i>	30
Organisation of the thesis	31
CHAPTER TWO - HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN AUSTRALIA	32
Introduction	32
Early settlement from 1788 – 1930s	32

Early dissent in Australia	34
Heterogeneity of the Jewish community	37
Anti-Semitism, assimilation and survival	41
Conclusion.....	44

**CHAPTER THREE – IDENTITY, DIASPORA-HOMELAND NEXUS AND
SILENCING OF DISSENT** 45

Introduction	45
Negotiating Jewishness	46
<i>The idea of ethnic election ('chosenness')</i>	48
<i>Jews as 'eternal' victims</i>	50
Jewishness in the diaspora: from assimilation to continuity	52
<i>The intermarriage-assimilation relationship</i>	55
Diaspora – homeland nexus	61
<i>Where is the 'homeland' for diaspora Jews?</i>	61
<i>The diaspora-Israel relationship</i>	62
The silencing of dissent – an historical view	66
Conclusion	71

CHAPTER FOUR – DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS 73

Introduction	73
<i>The activist construction of the mainstream Jewish community</i>	75
<i>The question of Zionism</i>	77
<i>Jewish activists and the silencing of dissenting voices</i>	81
<i>Self-silencing/censorship</i>	84
<i>Jewish identity and the role of ethics and religion in peace activism</i>	88
<i>The silencers of dissenting voices</i>	93
Conclusion	94

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS – IN DARK AND TROUBLED TIMES ...	97
Possibilities for further research and limiting factors in this study	101
<i>and in the end...</i>	102
APPENDIX A	106
APPENDIX B	107
APPENDIX C	112
APPENDIX D	113
REFERENCES	114

PREFACE

and in the beginning...

This study has developed from my observations of a small, progressive Jewish congregation of which I was a member, where I experienced a tacit embargo that prevented me from discussing my ‘dissenting’ views of the Israel/Palestine conflict. This implicit proscription came in the form of subtle messages that precluded any critical debate or discussion of Israeli policies. For example, when I commented that Ariel Sharon’s walk onto the Muslim Haram al Sharif area was a provocative act, I received a hasty, embarrassed response of, “Oh! I don’t know about that” from one member of the congregation. I later discovered that this congregant did in fact have similar views to me, but only openly discussed these with close and trusted friends.

I eventually became aware that I was silencing myself with the rationalisation that I did not have the right to generate tension within a friendly, close-knit group of fellow Jews. Sunstein (2003:29) suggests that individuals within a group often do not want to risk the disapproval of their friends and allies, as “sometimes they fear that they will, through their dissent, weaken the effectiveness and reputation of the group to which they belong”. On a deeply personal level, I felt both hypocritical and complicit in the silence of diaspora Jews regarding Israel’s efforts to maintain its occupation of the Palestinian territories. Over time, my growing concerns were both for the Palestinian people and for my own people who were supporting a position that I believed to be antithetical to the values of Judaism.

About the same time, I read a paper published in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* that had a profound effect on me and on my personal struggle. The paper, entitled ‘Defended or Reconciled Peace in Israel and Palestine’, suggested that for a real peace to be possible between Israelis and Palestinians in a bi-national state, an eventual process of ‘truth and reconciliation’ would need to occur, via:

a ‘truth commission’ like forum, which addresses the personal legacies of the war and loss of both the Israelis and the Palestinians in order that both sides

collectively witness the lived consequences of the past 50 years and more (Humphrey 2000:325).

I remembered that such a process had occurred in South Africa following the end of the Apartheid system. I decided then (in 2002) that my goal would be to live and experience this ‘truth and reconciliation’ process, in order to bring real peace to a tragic and fractured land in the Middle East.

I finally made the decision to walk away from the congregation where I had felt silenced and sought to resolve my personal dilemma within this academic inquiry. I gave voice to my conflict in an article published in the Australian Jewish Democratic Society Newsletter (Salom 2001:13) and increased my involvement with a group of Jewish and Palestinian peace activists. In doing so, I enacted my position on the question of Israel/Palestine without disturbing the harmony of that friendly Jewish group. However, I take responsibility for the fact that my silence may have had the effect of being a ‘social loss’ to that particular Jewish group. Sunstein (2003:81) refers to a phenomenon called ‘pluralistic ignorance’, where:

people silence themselves not because they believe they are wrong, but because they do not want to face the disapproval that they think would follow from expressing the view they believe to be correct... assuming wrongly that others have a certain view. [T]his self-censorship is a serious social loss.

I have frequently questioned whether I made the right decision in not sharing my views more openly. Perhaps if I had been more outspoken, I would have offered support to others struggling with the same sensitive issue. As Sunstein (2003:210) suggests, “when grave injustice exists, it often persists only because most people have a false impression of what other people think”. Nonetheless, this study has afforded me an insight into the experiences of other Jewish peace activists and allowed me to contribute to an understanding of the Australian Jewish community and those who dissent from the wisdom of their ‘tribe’.