

THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE

THE CAPE TOWN HEBREW CONGREGATION, 1841 – 1905

By Solly Berger

The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, which built the Great Synagogue, was founded in 1841. This makes it, after the Sydney Hebrew Congregation, the oldest Jewish congregation in the southern hemisphere.

Until the 17th Century C.E. the history of Jewry had been played out in the relatively confined geographical area of the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia. Beyond these regions it did not spread until, on the back of the colonial expansion of Europe overseas, fledgling Jewish communities were created in the Americas, Australasia and sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, the establishment of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation (Tikvat Israel) in 1841 should be viewed as part of a relatively recent expansion of Jewry under the aegis of the Dutch, French and British Empires, which saw the first congregations established in North America in the 1650s and 1670s (the Shearith Israel congregation in New Amsterdam/New York and the *Yeshivat Israel* congregation in Newport), in Australia in 1828 (the Sydney Hebrew congregation), in New Zealand in 1843 (the Beth Israel congregation in Auckland) and in South America in 1862 (the Buenos Aires congregation).

In the case of the Cape, though a colonial settlement was founded by the Dutch East India Company in the mid 17th Century, the Company did not allow any form of public worship other than Protestant Christianity. Thus, although some apparently Jewish names do appear in the Company's Cape records, it is clear that Judaism was not openly practised, if at all. The strange irony of these religious laws was that Dutch Jews, who eventually became the majority shareholders of the Dutch East India Company, never attempted to liberalize the Company's laws of worship. In contrast, the Dutch West India Company, which controlled the areas of what became New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Delaware, always allowed freedom of worship.

This religious intolerance remained official policy at the Cape until 1804 when the Company's short-lived successor Dutch regime, the Batavian Republic, inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of the French Revolution, removed the ban on religious freedom. Even then, the number of Jews at the Cape was so small and so assimilated, that it was not until the 1830s that economic opportunities were able to draw sufficient Jews from Europe

to what by then had become a British colony, to achieve the critical minyan mass needed to try and set up a Jewish congregation. A first attempt to do so in Grahamstown in 1838 did not get off the ground, while in Cape Town “several ineffectual attempts” were made “to collect a sufficient number of Israelites for the purpose of Divine worship according to the Mosaic Law, wherein it is commanded that no less than 10 Males of 13 years of age can constitute a congregation for general public prayers of Israelites.”

In this disappointing situation, the arrival in Cape Town in 1839 of Benjamin Norden, an enterprising and dynamic 1820 Settler from Grahamstown, with a record of public service there, seems to have been decisive in turning these failures around. On the eve of the Day of Atonement, 26 September 1841, Kol Nidrei night 5602, 14 men, 3 boys and presumably, some women of the Jewish faith (though the male-blinkered records do not mention the women) met in his new house, Helmsley Place, in Hof Street, and held a service in accordance with the Orthodox tradition. This site today forms part of the Mount Nelson Hotel. Eight days later, on 3 October (Chol Hamoed Sukkoth), 10 of these men met at the Loop “Street house of another of the worshippers, Simeon Marcus, to take their hopeful initiative a step further by establishing the Society of the Jewish Community of Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope (which became the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation), known in Hebrew as Tikvat Yisrael (‘Hope of Israel’). Very soon it followed this up with regular *Shabbat* and Festival services in the homes of its leading members. The fledgling congregation’s other initial step was that standard practice in new Jewish communities, the acquisition of land for a Jewish cemetery. Here it ran into Judaism’s still twilight status in official circles, for the new Municipality of Cape Town turned down its request for the customary free grant of land for a cemetery and instead required it to pay £10 for a plot on Somerset Road. Miffed at this refusal and at the proximity of the offered site to a slave cemetery – which it supposedly took as a sly reference to Jews being descended from slaves in Egypt – the congregation withdrew its application and instead used funds generated by the sale of land donated to it by an out-of-town supporter to purchase a plot in Woodstock for burial purposes. A stone wall was built around the new cemetery and a *Tahara* house erected, thanks to a donation by Benjamin Norden. The first person to be buried there was one of the congregation’s founder members and trustees, the 41-year old Abraham Horn, a Rhinelander, who died in December 1844. His posthumously-born son, Charles, was the first child whose name was recorded in the new congregation’s register of Jewish births in 1845.

Even before this, however, in June 1844, the first Jewish wedding in the Cape had taken place, between Amelia Marcus and Michael Benjamin. The matrimonial alliance encountered a problem, primarily because there existed no marriage officer in the Jewish community. It was resolved by requesting the Senior Colonial Chaplain of St George’s Cathedral, the Rev George Hough, to solemnise the marriage in a manner that would give no

offence to Jewish religious susceptibilities. This arrangement received the consent of the Attorney-General and all mention of the Holy Trinity and anything else objectionable to Jewish feeling was omitted. Thereafter, *Mincha* was read and a second marriage ceremony carried out, this time 'according to our ancient Law of Moses and of Israel'.

By 1847 the congregation's membership had grown to 28 and encouraged by the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, it decided that the time had arrived to take a step further by obtaining a rabbi and securing a permanent place of worship. However, Simeon Marcus, one of the pillars of the congregation, strongly disagreed, feeling that the community could not afford the likely expense and accordingly resigned, taking with him his two sons and his son-in-law. For a short period, therefore, he conducted his own separate services and Cape Town had two *minyanim*.

Meanwhile, led by Norden, the rest of the congregation set about raising the necessary funds to achieve their two goals. They did not limit their appeal just to Cape Town nor to Jews only as they did so.

Within a year they had raised enough to purchase a house in Plein Street to serve as a shul, but then changed their mind when they found more suitable premises on the corner of St John's and Bouquet Streets in Gardens, across the road from then-under-construction St Mary's Cathedral. The two houses and adjoining store on the site were bought for £800 in 1849 – this time transfer fee was waived, suggesting that Judaism had at last been officially accepted as a legitimate religious denomination by the state – and the larger house was refurbished to form the first synagogue. Today the land is occupied by Belvedere House and forms part of the parliamentary complex, but a plaque on this building marks it as the site of the first shul in sub-Saharan Africa. The Congregation's first minister, the 46-year old Reverend Isaac Pulver, who arrived from Cheltenham in August 1849, formally consecrated the Shul on Shabbat eve 15 September 1849.

This little synagogue served the congregation for the next 14 years, but this turned out to be a period when the 'Hope of Israel' flickered uncertainly. Falling membership and ructions both internal and external during these years threatened to overwhelm the tiny congregation.

Strife arose almost as soon as the new shul had been opened, when Benjamin Norden became deeply involved in the Anti-Convict Crisis of 1849-50, taking up a stance which won him great popular hostility in the town to the point of being stoned by a mob in the street. By extension, this ill-feeling spilled over to his congregation too and a policeman had to be stationed in front of the new shul during services there so as to prevent any disturbances. The Congregation was anything but supportive of Norden's

actions and under the name of its president, placed the following notice in the press to distance itself from him:

“No member of the Jewish persuasion with the exception of those already known have acted against the wishes of the people of this colony, nor have been implicated in any way whatsoever to thwart any steps taken against the introduction of convicts. Though some malignant persona, out of mere malice, are exciting the public mind to condemn a whole community for the unworthy act of one or two, for conclusion I beg to say on behalf of the Jewish community, that they are grateful to their Christian brethren for the benevolence shown towards them in contributing so liberally to their cause.”

Nor was financial situation comfortable and various methods were employed to raise income. The committee devised a Code of Laws, in fact 113 of them, whereby fines were issued for various transgressions. For instance: Taking off the *talith* or talking during the Services, 2/6d. Disturbing meetings 5/-. Ignoring a notice to attend a *Minyan* 5/-. This code of conduct irked many but was accepted until the congregation's finances improved in the 1870's, when members' objections were finally upheld and the code shelved.

The keeping of Kashrut was a problem too. Reverend Pulver who was also a *shochet* performed the *shechita* with a butcher's help. The problem of finding enough customers for purchasing the koshered meat made the exercise uneconomical, however. This produced friction between the minister and his congregation, leading to a split among the members. Added to a meagre salary and a barren Jewish environment in which to raise his children, this proved too much for Pulver and he resigned after only two years.

“My principal reasons for wanting to leave this congregation,” he wrote in despair, “are first, that I cannot get *kosher* meat; secondly, that I cannot as a Jewish parent bring up my children in a place where so little regard is paid to the principles of our Holy Religion; and thirdly, that notwithstanding nearly two years' trial to live as economically as possible, I could not make any income meet my expenses.”

Most debilitating of the problems facing the small congregation, however, was the loss of members through death, departure and disinterest and for several months at a time during the 1850s no services could be held for want of a *minyan*. More than once in these years there was serious discussion about dissolving the faltering congregation, but the strong personalities of those years prevent the closure. At one of the few well-attended services held in 1858, the son of Michael and Amelia Benjamin (the couple married in the two successive ceremonies back in 1844) celebrated the congregation's first *Barmitzvah*.

From 1859 the efforts of the few stalwarts to keep the congregation going were powerfully supplemented by those of the vigorous and charismatic man eventually appointed to succeed Pulver, the 31-year old Reverend Joel Rabinowitz, formerly of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation. Rabinowitz did not spare himself to breathe new life into the ailing congregation and inspired by his enthusiasm, positive outlook and extraordinary fundraising ability – he was known both within the community and without as ‘The Great Beggar’ – the congregation grew in numbers and financial strength. He raised funds for the underprivileged and the needy and formed the Jewish Philanthropic Society, which in later years became the present Board of Guardians and had the energy and the drive to visit Jewish brethren who lived in the outlying districts of the Colony.

On behalf of the struggling congregation itself, he issued a clarion call to his co-religionists throughout the Colony to rally to the support of the Mother Congregation to save it from having to close the doors of its synagogue. So successful was this appeal that by 1861 he was able to declare that a proper, custom-built synagogue was necessary to replace the dilapidated and cramped Bouquet Street Shul. Swept up by his enthusiastic vision, the committee was quickly persuaded and later that year it bought a property high up St John’s Street for a new synagogue. On this site it built the St. John’s Street Synagogue for the sum of £2200.

It was formally consecrated on 13 September 1863, *Erev Rosh Hashanah* and served the congregation for the next 42 years, until it was superseded by the Great Synagogue in 1905. Today, it houses the entrance to the South African Jewish Museum complex. In designing it, the architect, James Hogg, ‘supposedly’ made a careful analysis of Solomon’s Temple in the Books of Kings and Chronicles and incorporated features derived from this study in the final plan.

It remains a little known fact as to why the street that housed the two shuls has two names – St John’s Street and Hatfield Street. Not far from the first shul in Bouquet Street and just below the present-day South African National Art Gallery, were houses of ill repute. These brothels were situated in St John’s Street, while the upper reaches of the street, housed some very wealthy residents and of course the new shul. Their objections were respected and instead of removing the brothels, it was easier to change name of the street. And so upper St John’s Street became known as Hatfield Street. From this buoyant beginning the St John’s Street Shul never looked back, as the congregation grew by leaps and bounds over the next 40 years, on the back of the swelling of the Jewish community of Cape Town as a result of the influx of tens of thousands of Jews. The earliest of these immigrants were young men drawn to southern Africa by the diamond and gold rushes of the 1870s and 1880s, men like Samuel and

Isaac Marks, Isaac Lewis and Barney Barnato, all of whom joined the congregation and attended services in its shul when in Cape Town.

Far more numerous and ultimately more significant in their impact on the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation was the second component of this influx of Jews, those 'Great Migration' Jews fleeing the renewed pogroms in the Lithuanian and Polish territories of the Russian Empire after 1881. Many of them settled in Cape Town where they had arrived by sea and joined the Cape Town Hebrew, despite its very alien English atmosphere under Rabinowitz's unbending successor, the Reverend Abraham Orenstien.

Some trekked into the interior to sell their wares to the farmers as *smouse* and in many instances established a store in the middle of nowhere, which became a trading centre for the surrounding farming community. Villages and even towns developed from these humble beginnings, a good example being De Aar, established by the Friedlander brothers, father and uncle of a later president and trustee of the Great Synagogue, C.K. Friedlander. There was also Garies in Namaqualand, founded by Maurice Eilenberg, who subsequently also moved to Cape Town where he became president of the Congregation and a major benefactor. As these two examples suggest, in the absence of congregations in these remote rural areas, many of these immigrants became 'country members' of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation.

With this surge in membership, the Congregation prospered. Gas lighting was installed in the St John's Street Synagogue which itself had to be enlarged. A *mikveh* was built. A second minister, the Reverend F. Lyons was appointed and he also became the *shochet*. By 1891 there were nearly 1000 Jews living in Cape Town and approximately 10 000 in Southern Africa.

The following is an illuminating word-picture of the local scene in 1891 from the pen of a contemporary Capetonian;

"Touching our co-religionists in Cape Town, they are a fairly representative and industrious body. We worship in a bijou synagogue, which pretty as it is, is indescribable architecturally, although it has some pretension to the Byzantine. Our noble selves may be described as consisting of two classes, those who attend shul and those who don't. There are three sections – so to speak – among us, the highest are the big shopkeepers, the second are the small shopkeepers and the lowest- well, we have no lowest. The conditions of life are eminently comfortable and existence is not a very difficult problem with the majority.

Without egotism, we can claim the proud distinction of being a quiet, law abiding body, all more or less hardworking, following our respective pursuits with earnestness, if not with equal aptitude and results...It is

whispered that the royal road to 'society' is through the Cathedral. Hence a few, whom we can well spare, prefer society to the synagogue. Our Minister, the Rev A F Ornstien, is a popular man amongst all sorts and conditions. He is a distinct Chazan, an intelligent lecturer and is thoroughly broadminded, in fact he is the right man in the right place..... The class who go to shul are honestly Orthodox, the Reform Movement not having gained ascendancy here yet.....”

In this booming environment, the congregation was able to expand its activities into Jewish education too, and Rabinowitz's twice-a-week classes for children in a room attached to the shul were by 1879 able to expand into a full *cheder*. Reverend Ornstien, who had long experience as a schoolteacher and headmaster in England, took this project even further, by establishing his own full-time Jewish School in 1884, which drew pupils from near and far as it had a hostel for boarders too. By 1894 it had 80 pupils. After his death in 1895 it rapidly declined and in 1896 was entirely superseded by the foundation by the congregation of its own Cape Town Hebrew Congregational public School on the site of Hope Mill at the top of The Avenue. The driving force behind this initiative was the now-retired Reverend Joel Rabinowitz and Ornstien's successor as minister, the Reverend Alfred Philipp Bender. Supported by luminaries such as Cecil Rhodes, Jan Hofmeyr and various churches, it flourished and by 1902 had 500 pupils in its high school and separate junior school. It was eventually taken over by the Cape School Board and it lost its character as a Jewish school. It eventually closed its doors in 1920.

The congregation's new minister from 1895, the 32-year old Reverend Alfred Bender, proved to be an outstanding orator and scholar and was soon also appointed as Professor of Hebrew at the South African College, the predecessor of UCT. However, though his Cambridge-polished erudition and very English demeanor might have been tailor-made for the Anglo-Jewish ethos of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, it gave him little appeal among the Lithuanian and Polish immigrants who had been streaming into the city since the 1880s. To them, he and it were alien and the majority were disenchanted by the haughty treatment they received from the congregation, known to them, disparagingly, as the *Einglische Shul*. The culture that they brought from *der heim* was different and the feeling of *landsmanschaft* – the people from the same shtetls – encouraged them to set up their own congregations from 1895. To name a few – the ultra orthodox Beth Hamidrash in Constitution Street (1901), to become in later years, the Vredehoek Shul' the New Hebrew Congregation (1895) in Roeland Street and later to move to Schoonder Street; the Ponevez shul (1904) in Vandeleur Street and later to move to Maynard Street, which is where it still is; the *Chabad* Congregation (1897) in Buitenkant Street, then in Virginia Avenue and today in Arthurs Road, Sea Point though no longer a *Chassidische Shul*; and many other *shtiebl'ich* in rented rooms.

To this swelling community, the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 added thousands of Jews, uitlander refugees from the Transvaal republic, who temporarily doubled the local Jewish population to 10,000. Their sudden arrival in Cape Town in October 1899 raised many problems, for many of them had nothing but the clothes on their backs. Led by Bender, the congregation and the rest of the Cape Town Jewish community helped feed and house them. Their presence also put further pressure on an already overcrowded shul and during the High Festivals there was not enough seating to accommodate them. A Joint Festival Services Committee was formed comprising three representatives each from the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation and the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation. The Good hope Hall was utilised for the overflow services. Similar arrangements were also made at the Sea point Town Hall and Rabbi Dr Hertz, the minister of the Witwatersrand old Hebrew Congregation, preached at both centres, while Reverend Bender officiated at several overflow services too.

The St John's Street Shul was bursting at the seams and at the end of hostilities, plans were drawn up to build the Great Synagogue which opened its doors in 1905, its seating big enough to accommodate 1500 persons. The shul was designed by the architects Parker and Forsythe and build for the princely sum of 26 000 Pounds. It was formally opened by the President of the congregation, Hyman Liberman, who at the same time held the position of Mayor of Cape Town, the first Jew to occupy this office the little community's standing in the city had come far indeed since the Municipality of Cape Town had refused its application for a free grant of land for a cemetery back in 1842.

The year 1905 thus forms an end and a beginning of an epoch in the history of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation and of Cape Town Jewry.

In conclusion, an interesting assessment. Had the immigration of Jews ceased in 1860, little might have remained of the few early and lively communities in South Africa. Indeed today, there are no Jewish descendants left of the men who founded *Tikvat Israel* in 1841. Those that arrived in the mass migration in the years that followed, brought with them an organized entity with warm-heartedness, generosity, practical-mindedness combining into a special culture that has endured and made the SA community such a special segment and influence in the world of Jewry.

The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation's century-old Great Synagogue is an edifice which is one of the great beauties in the Jewish world and which brings great acclaim and admiration by all who pass through its portals, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

The Mother Synagogue belongs to all South Africans and has a history which we ALL should be proud of, no matter what synagogue, congregation or community we belong to.

Sources:

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