

THE MOTHER SYNAGOGUE

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The Great Synagogue of Cape Town, the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, the first Jewish community in South Africa, is situated in the beautiful municipal Gardens area, in the city centre in close proximity to the houses of Parliament and hence is popularly and most widely known as the Gardens Shul.

It is a stately, majestic edifice whose main entrance opens out into the Gardens and whose twin towers reach up significantly into the heavens above. This stately, majestic exterior is matched by an impressive, imposing interior. The front foyer is a museum in miniature conveying a sense of history with its plaques which commemorate various personalities who were involved in the affairs of the congregation. From there one proceeds into the main sanctuary and is immediately in the presence of sanctity and awe. This imposing interior is dominated by the ark which houses a rich collection of Sifrei Torah and which has the unique feature of being a walk-in ark, a feature absent in most other synagogues. Fronting this ark is the elevated and imposing pulpit which gives its occupant the Rabbi such a feeling of prominence, of authority, of being in the presence of greatness, that it must inspire an address of special spiritual sensitivity and reverence worth of being in such an atmosphere of awe. No wonder that the Gardens Shul is recognized by the City of Cape Town as one of its treasured sites, warranting a listing in the municipal tourist guides.

A word must be said also about the membership of the shul and those who attend its services, the worshippers and the members. I know, from the various occasions I acted as the Rabbi over the high festivals and from a six month stint of duty, the calibre of both categories. Everyone had a great sense of dignity and reverence, all knew how to behave with a feeling of awe and every service, whether on a Shabbat or on the days of awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur was a model of spiritual sensitivity. This manifested itself particularly on Yom Kippur, especially at yizkor. Gardens and an old minhag in this regard that a list of the departed was read out and as each name was read, somebody present, a son or husband or some relative, stood up. What an impression this made.

It was an honour to be a member of Gardens and everyone was fiercely loyal and devoted to the shul. It must also be remembered that so many of its members were and probably still are today descendants of old, well-known Cape Town Jewish families who were prominent not only in the Jewish community, but also in the wider community.

It would be a grave injustice when speaking or writing about Gardens not to make at very least a brief reference to its spiritual leaders and its clergy. With no offence to any others who have had or who do occupy this position, it must be recognized that two names dominate this aspect of Gardens, whose personalities are linked to the entire South African Jewish community and who guided the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation with distinction and dedication and devotion and contributed so much to its fame and reputation. Between them, for a period of over 70 years, the Rev Alfred Philip Bender and Rabbi Professor Israel Abrahams his successor (who later during his term of office became Chief Rabbi when the United Council of Synagogues came into being in the Cape) both brought great honour to the congregation and their names are etched in the boldest of letters in its history.

Gardens can also boast of fine chazanim who occupied the bimah with distinction to the accompaniment of masterly choristers. Other officials too have served the shul with loyalty, devotion and dignity.

Gardens and its leadership inspired the birth of synagogues and communities far beyond its environs and as such, also earned the honoured title of the Mother Synagogue.