

**‘HE MINISTERED EXCELLENTLY’:
THE AUSTRALIAN CAREER OF
REV. ZALEL MANDELBAUM**

Rabbi Raymond Apple¹

Mandelbaum House at Sydney University perpetuates the memory of Rev. Zalel Mandelbaum and his wife Freda, parents of the benefactor, Rachel Lipton. Rev. Mandelbaum’s full name was Rabbi Bezalel Mandelbaum. He was known by the nickname Zalel and in Australia followed the (then) British custom of styling oneself Reverend. The surname Mandelbaum means ‘almond tree’, but from historical studies of the town of Turov it appears that the name was really Mendelbaum, deriving from an ancestor called Mendel. Perhaps it was one of the “nice” names paid for by a bribe to the authorities, and was subsequently Germanised to Mandelbaum.

Born in Turov, about 400 km from Minsk, on 6 February 1865, Bezalel was the second child of the Turever Rabbi, Barukh Mandelbaum (1834-1905) and his wife Leah, née Teitelbaum. Jews had been in Turov from the early 1600s and in the late nineteenth century constituted half of the population of the town. Rabbi Barukh (and therefore Zalel) had an impressive lineage. He claimed descent from Rashi – and before him from David, King of Israel – and was connected with the Maharal of Prague. The author of the rabbinic work *Noda BaShe’arim* (“Known in the Gates”), Rabbi Barukh moved his family to Palestine when Zalel was an infant. Their emigration from Russia, entailing arduous travel, was in order to escape antisemitic persecution as well as for ideological reasons; like the Talmudic sages, the Turever Rabbi would have regarded walking four cubits on the holy soil as the high point of his life (*Talmud Ketubot*, 111a).

Zalel’s education in Jerusalem was traditionally Talmudic, undoubtedly guided by his father. He gained a range of practical skills as a *shohet* (animal slaughterer) and *mohel* (circumciser). He probably also had some ability as a *hazzan* (cantor). He could well have been an expert *sofer* (scribe) as well.



*The Mandelbaum Family.
Zalel is on the right, next to his mother.*

Amongst Zalel's siblings the most famous brother was Simḥa, born about 1870, who went back to Russia and married Esther Liebe Epstein (a daughter of the Rabbi of Kobrin, who was also interim Rebbe of Slonim). Simḥa was a scholar whilst his wife was a businesswoman, and they had eleven children. They stayed in Russia for a number of years but finally succeeded in making Aliyah in 1921. The four-storey mansion they built in Jerusalem to accommodate their children, children-in-law and family, was known as Bet Mandelbaum - Mandelbaum House. In later times its location at the seam of Israel and Jordan became known as Mandelbaum Gate. When the foundations of the house were being dug, coins from the Bar Kokhba period were discovered, indicating the historicity of the

site. Simḥa did not live long enough to witness the exciting things that later years brought to his house, since he died on 3 May 1930.

At the time of armed struggle in Eretz Yisra'el, Mandelbaum House became a Haganah headquarters. Arms were hidden there under the grandmother's bed and when the premises were checked for illegal arms, the authorities were told that the grandmother was ill and no-one could disturb her in her bedroom. The building itself was eventually blown up but was later rebuilt and today houses a Breslover *yeshivah*. There is a Mandelbaum Park nearby. The name of Mandelbaum House was of course known to Zalel's daughter Rachel, who, decades later, at the other end of the world, left instructions that this was to be the name of the college she endowed at the University of Sydney.

Apart from Simḥa, Zalel's other siblings were Menahem, Yitzḥak David, Hendel Steinbuch, Naomi Ginzberg and two more. At least one settled in the United States. There were other Mandelbaums in Australia, but it is not known whether they had any connection with the Rabbi of Turov.

In Palestine, Zalel married Chaya (her maiden name was something like Kancel). They had one daughter, Tsipporah (Celia), born on 27 March 1892. The marriage did not last. Zalel and Chaya divorced and for some years their daughter stayed with her mother in Palestine.

Zalel's second wife was Frieda. The daughter of Shmuel Joffe, she was born in 1875. They married in Palestine in the mid-1890s and in due course two daughters were born in Port Said – Rachel in 1897 and Rosa, around 1900.

The family's move to Port Said in the 1890s may have been because Zalel was unsettled after his divorce or due to economic depression in Palestine, or both. I have so far been unable to ascertain much about his life in Port Said. Though he was an Ashkenazi it appears that he was involved in the Sephardi community. It is likely that he had some kind of business, possibly as an innkeeper, and served the community as a *shoḥet*. Port Said had quite a small Jewish population and was liable to antisemitic outbreaks, so the Mandelbaum family would not have wished to remain there for long. As ships to and from Australia brought Jewish visitors to the port, Zalel made the acquaintance of some of them and gave them hospitality. From them he would certainly have heard that Australia was a good place for Jews. He is likely to have kept in touch with his father, who lived until 1905. As Palestine was not far away, Rachel was possibly taken back to Jerusalem to the Evelina de Rothschild School and began to learn English.

Zalel did as many migrants did; he left Port Said on his own and promised to send for his family once he got settled. He embarked for

Australia on the *SS Stuttgart*, arriving at Fremantle on 24 August 1904, aged 39. Thereafter, he remained in Australia. He must have found some form of subsistence in Fremantle or Perth in the initial period, but then contact was established with the new Jewish congregation in Broken Hill, New South Wales, which appointed him as minister with free accommodation. At that stage Broken Hill had the second largest population in NSW – 30,000 people – and was an important centre. The Jewish community was as dynamic as the town and Zalel must have regarded himself as fortunate to have received this appointment.²

He travelled to Broken Hill by sea and rail and sent for his family. Frieda, with Rachel and Rosa, reached Australia on 5 April 1905. Travelling on the *SS Seidlitz* from Port Said they said they were German, which may have been Frieda's original nationality. Frieda now became Freda; Rosa became Rose. The congregation liked Zalel but did not pay him well, so Freda took in mending and sewing.

We presume that Zalel had already picked up some English at Port Said, and he had to learn the language seriously when he came to Australia. He certainly spoke quite good English as a middle-aged man in Broken Hill. His Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) sermons were published verbatim in the *Barrier Miner*, and were described as 'appropriate'. For example, in 1912, he began his sermon asking why it stated that on Yom Kippur one has to celebrate the festival 'from even to even', focusing on one's worship of God. He stressed:

From eve to eve it bids us cease in our wonted occupation, dispense with our physical requirements, forego our personal comforts for fully 24 hours. All our powers and energies shall be concentrated, on that one great task before us – our reconciliation with God. No other instance of such austerity is to be found in the Mosaic dispensations!³

The *Hebrew Standard* also reported on his contributions, noting in 1910:

The Rev Z. Mandelbaum conducted the services in his usual satisfactory manner. His 'Kol Nidrei' service was particularly fine and was pleasingly commented on. On both days the reverend gentleman addressed his congregation upon the significance of the days which were being solemnly observed.⁴

He was the general factotum of the congregation and spent ten years there from 1905-1914. His house was the headquarters of the community. The centenary history of Broken Hill Jewry praises his

efforts and says he was largely responsible for building the synagogue in 1910; previously the services had been held in a Masonic hall. During the ceremony for the laying of the Foundation Stone of the new synagogue in December 1910, the chairman, A. Rosenberg commented:

When he (A. Rosenberg) pointed out that for some years past a mere handful of Jewish residents had provided the ways and means for the maintenance of their respected pastor, Mr. Mandelbaum - a gentleman who, in addition to being a good Hebrew scholar, had given entire satisfaction - he felt certain that it would be admitted that they had done very well indeed.⁵

In addition, to running the services, he also believed strongly in the importance of 'religious instruction of the young' and in 1912 expressed his pleasure at the increasing knowledge of the Jewish children who were learning at the Sabbath School, where his two daughters taught as well as himself.⁶

In addition to his work within the Jewish community, he was also active within the general community. The *Barrier Miner* regularly reported on his attendance at meetings of the Benevolent Society.⁷ Zalel was naturalised aged 47 in January 1913, stating that he was a Russian subject; the magistrate who recorded his details calls him 'Minister of the Gospel'.

Zalel left Broken Hill in September 1914, to be succeeded by Rev. Samuel Nathan Salas from Palestine. Salas was recommended by Chief Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz and arrived in Broken Hill on 7 December 1915, in time for Chanukah. Salas was subsequently assistant minister in Auckland and then minister in Christchurch, where he remained for many years. His brother, Rev. Marks Salas, also came to New Zealand and was assistant minister and *sho^{het}* in Auckland.

Broken Hill, and Australia in general, plunged Mandelbaum into a strange new life. There is a photo of him in his youth, wearing Eastern garb and presumably living in a *halakhic* cocoon. In Australia, by way of contrast, he was in a frontier society and encountered Jews of less than total orthodoxy, as well as non-Jews. A photo of him in old age shows a completely different man, an anglicized pastor in canonicals and a clerical collar. The change was due to the need to make a living but presumably had its ideological dimension. He must have constantly reflected on his life's metamorphoses, but his papers, which might have contained a clue to his thinking, are not extant or at least not available.

After leaving Broken Hill, Zalel moved back to Perth, where he

was *sho^{het}* and acting minister in the absence overseas of Rev. David Isaac Freedman, who was serving as a chaplain during World War I.⁸ Zalel stayed in Perth for eleven years, during which time Rachel and Rose relocated to Sydney, where Rachel entered Sydney University and Rose became a musician. One Perth historian (Philip Masel) says Zalel 'ministered excellently'; another (David Mossenson) notes that the minute books record complaints about Zalel and even say that pork was found in the butcher shop.

At some stage Celia came to Australia, being registered as a Turkish subject. On 21 June 1916, aged 24, she married Harry Greenberg (born in Safed on 20 March, 1896) at the Perth Hebrew Congregation, with Zalel officiating: on the documents he called himself Assistant Rabbi. Zalel gave Hebrew lessons to his grandson Leslie in the family living room after school, and on Friday evenings the family gathered in the Mandelbaums' house for dinner. Harry and Celia shortened their surname to Green and later moved to Sydney to be nearer their family. Celia died in Sydney in February 1962, and was buried at Rookwood Cemetery.



*Rachel Lipton
(nee Mandelbaum)
1896 - 1978
Founder of Mandelbaum House*

Rachel gained a BA degree in 1918 aged 22 from the University of Sydney, and became a high school teacher of Latin and English. In 1934, she gained an MA. She married Ernest S. Jerdan in 1920 and then (in the 1950s) a German Jew, Harry Lipton, originally a printer. Living in Macleay Street, Potts Point, the Liptons were members of the Great Synagogue. They ran a hotel and then a city tobacconist's shop, and moved into property ownership and development. Rachel endowed a music scholarship in Rose's name, established Mandelbaum House in Sydney and left a legacy to the Hebrew University. She died on 8 March 1978. Harry died some years later. Rose never married but became a well-known music teacher. For a while she was secretary of the Ballarat branch of the National Council

of Jewish Women as well as a local musical identity. She died in Sydney on 27 August 1943.

Zalel retired to Sydney about 1926 but soon afterwards applied for a vacant ministerial position in Ballarat. Dating back to goldrush days, Ballarat was a historic congregation known for its orthodoxy: indeed there had been a time when the town had two orthodox synagogues.

At the request of the board of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation, Rabbi Francis Lyon Cohen of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, checked Zalel's credentials and capacities, and authorized him as *shohet* for the congregation. Zalel stayed in Ballarat for fourteen years, respected by the gentiles and held in affection by the Jews, though it must have been a rather lonely life for Zalel and Freda with their family so far away. Early in the 1930s my own father settled in Ballarat and ran a business, attending Zalel's synagogue for services and (I think) being invited home by the Mandelbaums for company, meals and Yiddish conversation. Zalel was liked and esteemed, known to be genial and tolerant of his congregants' foibles whilst inwardly disappointed at their low standards of observance. At this stage Ballarat was past its peak and paid quite a low salary but gave free housing and tried hard to make the ministerial house comfortable and pleasant. Pictures of Rev. and Mrs. Mandelbaum depict them as a nice elderly couple; Zalel himself, as was the habit of the time, wore a clerical collar. Newman Rosenthal notes in his history of the Ballarat congregation that the Mandelbaum family gave 'every satisfaction' and 'earned the goodwill and appreciation' of the community.⁹

In the late 1930s, Zalel was unwell and wanted to retire, but there were no applicants for the position, possibly because the salary was too low. Zalel therefore stayed in office until he died on 17 August 1941, aged 77. After a memorial service in the synagogue, he was buried at Ballarat Cemetery by Rabbis Jacob Danglow and Harry Freedman of Melbourne, and both the Jewish and Ballarat papers published appreciative obituaries.

Zalel's wife Freda died at Woollahra, Sydney, aged 78 on 12 March 1953, and was buried at Rookwood by Rabbi Israel Porush. Freda presumably took Zalel's books and papers to Sydney with her when she moved there, but their current location is not known. Some of the family records and possessions are said to be in the Rachel Lipton collection in the Rare Books section of Sydney University Library, but the material has apparently been mislaid and no-one is therefore able to fill in the gaps in the family story.

These gaps include some aspects of Rachel Lipton's thinking, personality and career. Though I was appointed a trustee in her will,

1st September, 1941.

COUNCIL BULLETIN

In Memoriam.

It is with deep regret and with a sense of real loss to our Organisation that we have learned of the passing of the Reverend Z. Mandelbaum, Minister of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation, Victoria.

No greater friend and admirer of our work has Council ever had than in the person of our revered friend and honoured supporter. His life was one of unexampled loyalty for the race from which he sprung. His faithful adherence to all the precepts of our sacred religion and his benign influence over the members of his congregation, created a stronghold of Judaism in the City in which he lived for many years. Though he reached the allotted span of life, he leaves a gap in which cannot be filled. His passing is a very great loss to Australian Jewry, especially at this most critical period in its history.

He fearlessly strove to carry out the traditions and precepts of our ancient faith. The high esteem in which he was held by the non-Jewish Community of Victoria has been manifest by the praises bestowed upon his strong personality, his integrity, and lofty ideals. These have marked him a true son of Israel, worthy of his race.

He was loved, admired and respected by all who knew him. We take courage to carry on our self-imposed heavy tasks with the knowledge that our dear friend toiled unceasingly in the cause of Jewry. We must continue where he left off so that Israel may survive throughout the ages.

We voice our profound sympathy with his bereaved wife and daughters, with the N.C.J.W. of Ballarat to whom he was an inspiration, and with the members of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation.



Rev. Zalel Mandelbaum's Obituary from a National Council of Jewish Women's Publication

I did not know her very well. Like any historian I have all sorts of questions, but there is no-one who is still alive who could suggest the answers. In a booklet marking the tenth anniversary of Mandelbaum House, Professor Alan Crown, who had a close connection with Rachel and was probably the first person to learn what she was planning, hinted at parts of the story when he commented:

In many ways she was a contradictory personality...She had a very interesting life, crossing traditional boundaries in many ways and consequently I think she felt she hadn't done the right thing by her parents. Additionally, as a young girl moving from Broken Hill to Sydney, she looked for a suitable place for a young Jewish girl to stay. So the College would fulfil that need in the community.¹⁰

Without Zalel's library and papers, we will probably never be able to assess him as a scholar, teacher and preacher. He might have left sermon texts or outlines, but this cannot be verified. It is unlikely that he left any notes on Biblical or Talmudic subjects, but this is a

supposition given that no definitive information is available. The Mandelbaum family in Eretz Yisra'el lost contact with Zalel after he went to Australia, though he probably kept in touch with his parents until they died but not with his siblings and their children. The family thought he had a large orthodox community in Australia and wrote Talmudic studies – a highly unlikely possibility at that time. His great-nephew Dr Simḥa Mandelbaum came to Sydney with his wife for the opening of the College in 1996 and was intrigued at the thought that the name Mandelbaum House had been given a new lease of life so far away from Jerusalem.

Oral history would have been a great help in attempting a personal and professional portrait of Zalel, but it is probably too late to look for anyone who knew him personally. However, there have been a number of books written dealing with the different congregations Rev. Mandelbaum served, which if properly utilized would at least place his career in context,¹¹ though in the meantime we have more questions than answers.

Zalel served three Australian congregations, Broken Hill, Perth and Ballarat. Since Ballarat is the place where he spent longest and represents the final maturing of his work and outlook, we can look at it first, regardless of chronological sequence. In the late nineteenth century Ballarat was Australia's first and foremost orthodox *shtetl*. By Zalel's time, however, it was really a place of memory and in decline. The 1930s when he was there was the period of the depression. Were economic pressures worse there? Did economic necessity make a decreasing *kehillah* of small traders less and less Sabbath-observant? How many kept *kosher* apart from Zalel? How cohesive was the congregation? What were its relations with the general population? What influence did Nathan Spielvogel, the Ballarat historian, have on the population of the town? Was there any real antisemitism? What were the relationships with other parts of Australian Jewry? Are there any points of comparison with Newcastle, the only relatively similar community?

Zalel's ten years in Broken Hill cannot really be compared to his time in Ballarat. Broken Hill's decline came later. Zalel's incumbency was at the high point of the community but there are still questions we need to ask about who the Broken Hill Jews were and how the non-Jews regarded them.¹²

Perth was a larger and more stable community than either Ballarat or Broken Hill and the only congregation where Zalel was one of a ministerial team. This invites questions as to his professional relationships and whether the relatively elastic orthodoxy of Rabbi Freedman had any impact on Zalel. Again we need to ask how the Jews got on with the general community, though this was

Freedman's area of involvement more than Zalel's. Internal Jewish issues also need to be looked at in the light of Zalel's personality, such as Zionism, Yiddish and Hebrew. If only we had the means to answer such questions as these we would have a better picture of Zalel.

Since his time Australia – and the world – has changed radically. In the new era it is worth recalling that the name 'Mandelbaum' means almond tree, and as a Biblical Hebrew verb *sh-k-d*, an almond, indicates to watch over. Thanks to Zalel and Freda's daughter, the family name survives. Mandelbaum House has enabled the almonds of Judaism to flourish once more, and allowed Judaism in Australia a new opportunity to watch over its people and surroundings.

ENDNOTES

1. This paper was presented to the AJHS annual general meeting, Sydney, 29 November 2015. It was originally published in *Oz Torah*, <http://www.oztorah.com/2015/11/he-ministered-excellently-the-australian-career-of-rev-zalel-mandelbaum/>
2. For more detail on the history of the Jews in Broken Hill, see Suzanne D. Rutland, Leon Mann, and Margaret Price (eds), *Jews of the Outback: The Centenary of the Broken Hill Synagogue 1910–2010* (Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2010).
3. 'Jewish Holy Days, Day of Atonement Service, *Barrier Miner*, 25 September 1912, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/45216526?searchTerm=Mandelbaum&searchLimits=l-australian=y|||sortby=dateAsc|||l-state=New+South+Wales|||l-title=53|||l-category=Article>. Accessed 12 April 2012.
4. *Hebrew Standard*, 18 November 1910.
5. *Barrier Miner*, 1 December 2010, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/45216526?searchTerm=Mandelbaum&searchLimits=l-australian=y|||sortby=dateAsc|||l-state=New+South+Wales|||l-title=53|||l-category=Article>. Accessed 12 April 2012.
6. 'Hebrew Congregation: The Feast of the Tabernacles – Distribution of Sabbath School Prizes', *Barrier Miner*, 4 October 1912, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/45216526?searchTerm=Mandelbaum&searchLimits=l-australian=y|||sortby=dateAsc|||l-state=New+South+Wales|||l-title=53|||l-category=Article>. Accessed 12 April 2016.
7. For example, see 'Benevolent Society: Fourtnightly meeting', *Barrier Miner*, 22 November 1912, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/45216526?searchTerm=Mandelbaum&searchLimits=l-australian=y|||sortby=dateAsc|||l-state=New+South+Wales|||l-title=53|||l-category=Article>. Accessed 12 April 2016.
8. For a detailed history see David Mossenson, *The Perth Hebrew Congregation 1892–2002* (Perth Hebrew Congregation, 2003).
9. Newman Hirsch Rosenthal, *Formula for Survival: the Saga of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1979).
10. Alan Crown, Mandelbaum House 10th Anniversary Brochure.

11. See Rutland, Mann, and Price (eds), *Jews of the Outback*; Mossenson, *The Perth Hebrew Congregation*; and Rosenthal, *Formula for Survival*.
12. Kate Mannix is completing her Master of Arts thesis on the Jews of Broken Hill, including a study of Jewish and non-Jewish relations in the town. She has kindly traced some of Mandelbaum's Broken Hill addresses and sermons that were published in the *Barrier Miner*, as well as information from the *Hebrew Standard of Australasia* and sent them on for this article.