THE SEPHARDIM OF AUSTRALIA

Gad Ben-Meir

Sephardim in Australia form part and parcel of the general Jewish Community which is predominantly Ashkenazi. There are no specific statistics to evidence their true numbers. My own estimate ranges between 5–6,000 scattered over the States and Territories.[1] The vast majority live in Sydney (about 3,500–4,000) and Melbourne (about 1,200–1,500), where they succeeded in developing their own congregations and building their own synagogues. In this article, I will endeavour to sketch the history of Sephardim in general and of Sephardi settlement in Australia in particular. I will review their achievements to date and express an opinion about their future.

In writing this article, I was greatly assisted by the book *Sephardim in Australia and New Zealand* written by Mr. Aaron Aaron,[2] and by the scholarly papers written by Dr. Myer Samra,[3] Mr. Henry Shaw,[4] and Ms. Fiona Kaufman.[5] Each in his or her own way has contributed appreciably to the knowledge about and understanding of Sephardi history and the significance of Sephardi tradition and culture.

The central fact in the early difference between Sephardim and Ashkenazim is that over a very long period of time, in fact until the end of the sixteenth century, Sephardim lived under the rule of mighty empires — the Byzantine, Persian, Moslem, Mongol and finally Turkish. The Ashkenazim lived among Christians. And whereas the last of those Empires declined, there was a dramatic rise to power by the northern and western world in which the Ashkenazim lived. The Golden Age of Spain had first taken form in the Moslem period, and this was an essential element in the unity of the Sephardi world. Even though their beliefs and prayers were basically the same, differences in rituals, liturgy and folk practices were maintained over the centuries.

Thus, in the old centres of Safad, Baghdad, Cordova; in Amsterdam, Salonika, Constantinople; in Buchara, Smyrna and Sarajevo, Verona and Padua; in Marrakesh, Alexandria, Yemen or Cochin, Sephardim maintained their distinctive liturgy and cultural awareness. This treasury of Rabbinic scholarship, religious and philosophical investigation, and cultural and poetic excellence left by the *Gaonim* of Baghdad, Palestine and Persia, and by the giants of Judeo-Arabic literature in Spain, have become the mainstay for the spiritual survival of all contemporary centres of Jewish life. It is this heritage that Sephardim and trying to maintain and further develop in a new setting. What has happened to Jewish history is that this heritage, shaped over many centuries in the Middle East and spread all over the Jewish world have come back to the ancient homeland where modern Zionism established the State of Israel. Meanwhile, a remarkable change in the relative positions of Sephardim and Ashkenazim has occurred. Since the mid-sixties, Sephardim have outnumbered Ashkenazim in Israel. A new phase of cultural cross-fertilisation not only between Sephardi and Ashkenazi, but also between Jew and Arab, has commenced.

The two great groups into which Jews are divided are called Sephardim and Ashkenazim. In essentials their differences are in liturgy and in pronunciation of Hebrew. The Sephardi liturgy was derived from the great Jewish centre set up in

Babylonia by the exiles settled there by Nebuhadnezzar after the fall of the King-dom of Judah in 586 B.C.E. The Ashkenazi liturgy was derived from the revived community established in Palestine by the returning exiles who accompanied and followed Ezra and Nehemia. The development of Judaism, or rather, of Jewish liturgy, followed therefore two separate courses; the fact that communications between Spain and Babylonia were closer than those between Spain and Palestine made the influence of Babylonian Jewry prevail amongst the Sephardim. The pro-nunciation of Hebrew by both communities also developed considerable differ-ences, but not so extensive as to make the language of one group completely unintelligible to the other. Moreover, many Sephardim travelled a lot and came into contact with more widely scattered Jewish communities than did the Ashkenazim, who until the turn of the century were never established outside Europe.[6]

In their new homes in North Africa, in Turkey and in Italy the Sephardim absorbed the local communities so that for instance in Italy, where the Jews origi-nally followed the Ashkenazi rite, the whole community in the end became Sephardi. The separation of the Sephardim from the Ashkenazim, therefore, goes back probably to the beginning of the present era. The Jews who left Spain in 1492, and Portugal five years later, settled for the most part in North Africa, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire. After them, for two centuries and even longer, came the Marra-nos,[7] whose immigration to some extent followed the course of their earlier brethren. They settled in increasing numbers in South and Central America and the West Indies, where, although still under Spanish and Portuguese rule, they thought that the hand of the Inquisition and of its secular supporters would not reach them. Albert Hyamson[8] recounts a story which, he said, could not be confirmed but could be true. If authentic it brings into sharper focus the origins of the Anglo-Jewish community on the one hand and demonstrates the extraordinary sacrifices some Marranos made in order to maintain their faith.

In 1593 some Marrano fugitives from Portugal on a ship captured by an English vessel, were landed in England. Prominent in the party were a young man, Manuel Lopez Pereira, and his sister, Maria Nunez. Reports spread of the beauty of this girl and the Queen herself became interested. She was captivated by the girl's charm and offered her and her brother permission to settle in England, but the call of Judaism was stronger than personal ambition or prosperity. Settlement in England, even under Royal protection, meant, they felt, the ultimate loss of their Judaism. Pereira and Nunez refused the tempting offer and proceeded to their original des-tination, Amsterdam. There they helped in founding a Sephardi Jewish com-munity, which in course of time became the parent of Bevis Marks, the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in London.[9]

It was Marranos such as these who were the first Jews to settle in England after the expulsion of the Jews from the Kingdom in 1290C.E. They established them-selves mainly in London where they prospered and contributed to the wealth and influence of the city. They maintained relations with their brethren in Amsterdam, Montreal, New York and the West Indies, and they eventually produced one of England's greatest Prime Ministers — Benjamin Disraeli. It was a quarrel in 1813 with Bevis Marks over an imposition of a fine of £40 on his father Isaac that led to the baptism of the family in 1817. But for this historic incident, Disraeli could never have become Prime Minister. Throughout his fascinating political career Disraeli maintained his pride in his Jewish ancestry.[10]

The genesis of Sephardi settlement in Australia is directly related to the descend-ants of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of England. Several of the Jewish convicts

on the First Fleet had Sephardi names, and among the free settlers were a number of Sephardim who made considerable contributions to the development and wealth of the Colonies, as did their predecessors in the City of London. More about that later. Let me here recount the story of another ship which sailed the Mediterranean to Spain some five centuries before the ship which carried Pereira and Nunez to England.

During the reign of the Umayad Calif Abdul Rahman the Third in Cordova (912–916 C.E.), a foreign vessel sailing towards Spain was seized by the Calif's Admiral Ibn Rumahis. The ship carried a Babylonian Jewish family: Moses Ibn Inoch, his wife and their young son. Fearing dishonour the wife cast herself into the sea, while the boy and his father were taken captive and brought to Cordova where they were ransomed by the Jewish community. Moses Ibn Inoch turned out to be one of the most learned teachers at the famous Babylonian Academy of Sura. He had been sent on a fund-raising mission to Jewish centres in Spain and North Africa. At the time, Spanish Jewry was 'in a sense a religious cultural colony of Babylonian Jewry'[11] and the Western Arab Califs were, therefore, eager to encourage their Jewish subjects to become independent of the hegemony of Eastern Jewish learning and to stop sending funds to the lands of the Eastern Califs, their arch-enemies. And so, with the help of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, a cultured Jew and the Calif's trusted adviser,[12] Moses Ibn Inoch was appointed the head of the Talmudic school in Cordova. Under him and his friend Dunash Ben Labrat, another Babylonian scholar, Jewish literature and philosophy entered a new era lasting almost five centuries.

During this period Spanish Jewish philosophers, men of letters and grammarians produced such rich writings that it became known as the Golden Age of Jewry, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi. It is, therefore, no co-incidence that the works referred to above were all written during this period in Spain, almost all in Arabic. That includes, for example, Ibn Gabirol's two works *Mekor Hayyim (The Fount of Life)* and *Tikkun Midot Hanefesh (The Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul)*. Both works were written in Arabic during the first half of the eleventh century. And so was the masterpiece *Sefer Hovot Halevavot (Duties of the Heart)* by Bahiya Ibn Pakuda, written between 1100 and 1150 C.E., and so were Yehuda Halevy's *Sefer Hakuzari (Book of the Kuzari)* and Maimonides' work *Moreh Hanebokhim (The Guide for the Perplexed)*, a superb work of reconciliation and harmonisation between religion and philosophy. There was also Joseph Albo who completed his work *Sefer Haikkarim (The Book of Roots)* in 1428 in Hebrew.[13]

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, new centres of Jewish learning were established in Amsterdam, Venice and Leghorn. Jews from those centres found their way to England, and in the middle of the 17th Century established the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue at Bevis Marks. Those were the carriers of the great Sephardi tradition which, through some of their descendants, found its way to this far-away continent, Australia. Some arrived forcibly as convicts, others were free settlers.

Punishment by Transportation in England was first introduced in the year 1597, but it was not until 1718 that the policy was put into effect. In 1786 the Eastern coast of Australia as selected as a site for a penal colony under the name of New South Wales. From their prisoners were conveyed to Van Diemens Land (Tasmania) in small craft. No proper records are available about Jewish convicts or settlers in those early days and some of the names available may be Sephardi or Ashkenazi.

For example, Judah Solomon, a convict transported into Hobart in 1819, later to become the most prominent member of the Hobart Jewish community. Others were Mordechai Cohen and Moses Cohen who reached Hobart in 1818 and 1822 respectively.[14] The Hobart congregation did not have sufficient funds to build a synagogue. An appeal was made to Sir Moses Montefiore who made a generous contribution, and on Wednesday 9 August 1843, the community celebrated the laying of the foundation stone of the first synagogue in Tasmania. Judah Solomon and R. Furtado, who was Joseph Montefiore's partner, were present. The synagogue was built in Egyptian style in 1854. Hans Jacobs, its president, paid a visit to Calcutta where he met Lady Rachael Ezra of the Sassoon family. She presented the synagogue with a Holy Scroll encircled in a silver hand-beaten casing.[15]

The first sale of land in Geelong was held in Sydney in 1839. J. C. Breilat, who was a partner of Joseph Barrow Montefiore, bought two allotments in South Geelong for £30 each. The only Jew who lived there was Abraham Levy who ran a draper's business in Corio Street, North Corio.[16]

Joseph Barrow Montefiore bought land in Melbourne in the second sale of land also held in Sydney. He bought the plots at the corner of Spring and Flinders Lane, on the South side of Lonsdale Street between Spring and Exhibition Streets, and in Williamstown. At the age of 23 Joseph Barrow Montefiore, nephew of the great Sir Moses Montefiore, entered the Stock Exchange in London. He was one of twelve Jewish brokers in the City. That apparently did not satisfy his pioneering spirit. He immigrated to Australia where, during the subsequent half a century, he contributed greatly to the economic and political advancement of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. He supported the religious and social welfare of the Jewish communities in those colonies and became one of their highly regarded leaders.

Joseph Barrow Montefiore sought and obtained from the Governor 5,000 acres in Victoria, then went to Sydney and later to New Zealand where he and his brother Jacob founded a township in the Wellington Valley called Montefiores. The two brothers laid the foundation of the Bank of Australia and for a time Joseph acted as agent for the South Australian Government in New South Wales. He also gave evidence before a commission held in Sydney presided over by Chief Judge Forbes to enquire into the Usury act. Joseph Montefiore objected to any law fixing the interest on money. In disputed cases he suggested that Courts should be guided by the interest prevailing at the time. He contributed to the building of the Sydney Synagogue of which he became first President in June 1840. He was elected a member of the London Committee which pushed for the independence of Victoria from New South Wales. Joseph Barrow Montefiore became one of the most prominent businessmen in South Australia as well as in Victoria. He was one of the original trustees of the State Savings Bank, a member of the Stock Exchange, a committee member of the Chamber of Commerce and a pioneer in mining companies. He retired from business, returned to London and died there at the ripe age of 90.[17]

Other Sephardim who made valuable contributions to Jewish life in Victoria were E. Moses, A. E. Cohen, John Hendricks, C. Henriques, H. C. Pirani, C. Mendoza, G. Mendes, Mitchell Joshua Farjeon, Belifante, and Charles Dyte. They applied for and were readily given permission to conduct a Sephardi service at the Melbourne Synagogue. The numbers were apparently sufficient to justify not only a Sephardi service: in February 1846, J. M. Belisario wrote a letter to the editors of the *Voice of*

Jacob saying that the Sephardim 'will only accept the jurisdiction of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in London, not that of the local Beth Din'.[18]

In Ballarat, Charles Dyte became the President of the Jewish community in 1856. In 1861 he laid the foundation stone of the synagogue and of the Town Hall as Mayor of Ballarat. In 1866 he won the parliamentary seat of East Ballarat, whilst Edward Cohen won that of East Melbourne. In 1869 Edward Cohen was chosen by Premier McPhersen as Commissioner of Trade and Customs. In 1860 Joseph Henriques was named the first U.S.A. consul in Melbourne. Pirani, who was a brilliant mathematician, architect and surveyor, designed the bridge at Castlemaine and acted as mining surveyor at Sandhurst. He was a mathematics master at Wesley College, lecturer in mathematics at the Industrial and Technological Museum and lecturer in logic and mathematics at the University of Melbourne. Mr. Mendoza was selected from among fifty-one applicants as the librarian of the Ballarat East Public Library. De Lissa went to England to persuade the British government to open up Northern Borneo and to build Sandacan as a harbour for an intermediate port between China, Japan and Australia. Henry Aron, a scholarly Talmudist, wrote on Jewish theology and literature in the Jewish Herald under the pseudonym Aron Ben-Akaria. M. Mendoza was the Secretary of the Jewish Mental Aid Society, and S. M. Solomon was the Secretary of the United Friends, the Jewish Benevolent Society.

Those early Sephardim continued to conduct the Sephardi services for the High Holy Days in the school room of the Melbourne Synagogue, Mendoza and Sicree officiating, until about 1873 when they stopped because they conld not get a Sephardi *Minyan*.[19] Thereafter they gradually assimilated into the larger Ashkenazi community.

George Mocatta must be regarded as one of the early pastoral pioneers of Queensland. In 1848 he sent 1600 head of cattle overland from Central New South Wales to Moreton Bay. The journey took three months and was hailed as a great venture, opening up a new phase in the development of the northern region. In 1855 he left the district and transferred most of the property to Montefiore Graham and Co. In the Toowong cemetery there are a number of Sephardi graves which go back one hundred years, with names such as Garcia, De Lissa, Ben-Sussan and Elias. After World War Two a few Sephardim settled in Brisbane, but were absorbed into the general Jewish community.[20]

The very foundation of South Australia is firmly associated with the name of Jacob Montefiore, the elder brother of Joseph Barrow Montefiore. Jacob was born in Jamaica in 1801. He came to Australia in 1829. He was one of the Commissioners appointed by King William the Second to supervise the colonisation of South Australia. In 1843 he was given a civic welcome at the Shakespeare Tavern in Adelaide. The event was described in the *Southern Australian* of June 1843 as a testimony to his valuable services to the colony since its inception. The Montefiore Hill overlooking the city from North Adelaide perpetuates his memory and so does his own portrait presented to the Adelaide Art Gallery. Jacob Montefiore died in London in 1895.[21]

Unlike Jacob Montefiore, his brother Joseph spent many years in South Australia beginning in 1837 when he was acting as Agent for the colony of New South Wales. The second Jewish marriage solemnised in Adelaide was that of his daughter Esther Hannah who married Eliezer Montefiore Levi in May 1848 at his private residence at St. John Street, Adelaide. The last link with the Montefiores in South Australia

was severed when Moses Montefiore, Joseph's cousin, died in Adelaide in March 1920 at the age of 84.

Apart from Joseph and Jacob Montefiore other Sephardim figured prominently in the life of South Australian Jewry. Solomon Mocatta acted as Officiating Minister; Henry Senor Coronel was the First Secretary of the Congregation; Benjamin Mendes Da Costa bequeathed a valuable property to St. Peters College in 1869, and the Honourable Maurice Salom, who came to Australia in 1852, was a Member of Parliament and Treasurer, then President of the Hebrew Congregation. Moses Henriques, whose family was closely connected with the Montefiores and the Mocattas, was Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and acted for many years as Consul for Belgium. He married Emily Barrow Montefiore in Adelaide in February 1856.[22]

At the turn of the Century none of those Sephardim were left in South Australia, and no others settled there until the mid-fifties when some Jews from Egypt came to Adelaide and soon became active participants in the life of the Jewish community. They were too small in numbers to constitute a congregation of their own but they did manage to introduce parts of the Sephardi *Minhag* into the Ashkenazi *Minhag*. The new blend reflected the mutual tolerance and amity between the two sections of the community. Amongst those prominent in the community were the late Victor Ades who was the President of the Board of Deputies from 1963 to 1970; Albert Hassan, Treasurer of the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation since 1969; and Joseph Boulafi, President of the South Australian Zionist Organisation since 1962.[23]

The history of Sephardim in Western Australia does not differ much from that in South Australia. In 1855, Sir Moses Montefiore's nephew presented the congregation with a *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll) which is now located in the *Heichal* of the Perth Synagogue. A century later, a second Scroll was presented to the synagogue, this time by Joseph Sebag Montefiore who was then President of the Sephardi Federation in London. The Hebrew Congregation in Perth was formed in April 1891. The first Jewish wedding in the goldfields of Coolgardie was solemnised in July 1897, the ceremony being performed by Reverend Moses Saunders of Perth. Another Sephardi of note was A. E. Abadee who served as President of the Perth Hebrew Congregation from 1918 to 1930.[24]

After the Second World War a number of Sephardim settled in Perth. They came from Singapore, Rangoon, Egypt, England and India. Amongst them are the Bekhors, the Isaacs, the Benjamins, the Sadkas, and the Ezekiels. By 1948 they numbered about 70 people. There was some talk of establishment a Sephardi synagogue but there was not sufficient interest to bring it about. In 1960 the Nessim and the Shohet families who came from Singapore contributed generously to the building of a new synagogue, a Jewish school and a home for the aged. Two Sephardim of note currently living in Perth are Dr. Sassoon Gubbay, born in Singapore, a Neurologist at the Royal Perth Hospital and a convener of the Scientific Advisory committee, Australian Neurological Foundation; the other is Ronnie Gubbay, born in Baghdad in 1932, who came to Perth in 1968. He is currently the senior lecturer and director of the programme of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Western Australia, and the senior lecturer of the Free Jewish University in Perth.[25]

The history of Sephardim in New South Wales is well and ably covered in Aaron Aaron's book *The Sephardim of Australia and New Zealand*[26] and by Myer Samra in his work *The Immigration of Sephardi Jews to Australia*, and more concisely in his recent article published in *Historical Essays to Honour Rabbi Dr. Israel Porush, OBE,*

on his Eightieth Birthday.[27] I shall, therefore, concentrate here on the main aspects of Sephardi life in New South Wales.

Among the 751 convicts transported in the First Fleet there were ten who could be identified as Jews, two of them Sephardim Sarah Burdo and Joseph Tuso. Between 1788 and 1830, 384 Jewish convicts arrived in Australia; at least thirty can be identified as of Sephardi origin, sixteen males and fourteen females — names like John Roman, James Larra, George Fransisco, Uziel Baruch, Aron Mendoza, Joseph Mordechai and Jacob Messiah. In 1787 Larra received a grant of fifty acres in the district of the Field of Mars at a rent of one shilling, on condition that he lived on and cultivated the land and not sell it before the expiration of five years. In 1798 he was granted a liquor licence and became the first publican in Parramatta. He received another grant of five hundred acres and the freehold of the Parramatta property. In 1815 he lost his property and tavern and in 1825 was sent to prison for debts incurred by his wife. He died in 1839 and was buried in the Devonshire Street Jewish Cemetery. He was undoubtedly the most prominent Jew of Australia's early settlers.

Of the free settlers, as mentioned before Joseph Barrow Montefiore and his nephew Jacob Levi Montefiore and other members of that great family were amongst the first Sephardim to arrive in New South Wales. Others were Walter Jacob Levy, Saul Samuel, Alfred De Lissa and George Mocatta, his cousin John Israel Montefiore and his partner David Furtado. Thus, the Jewish community in New South Wales gained some members of the English aristocracy. Within ten years, Joseph Barrow Montefiore owned eleven thousand acres of land in the Wellington Valley and became the President of the Jewish congregation in New South Wales. Saul Samuel became the first Jewish Minister of the Crown and the first Jewish magistrate in New South Wales. Alfred De Lissa became the founder and first Secretary of the Law Institute of New South Wales.

By the end of the 19th Century, Sephardim in all the colonies had gradually died or assimilated into the larger Ashkenazi community. Not until the Second World War did a new wave of Sephardim find their way into the life of Australian Jewry. They came from India, Burma, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, Iraq, Persia, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, London and France.

Before the Six Day War, those hailing from India, Burma, Singapore and Shanghai formed the bulk of Sephardi immigration. These were the successors of the Asian Jewish communities established by Iraqi Jews in the late 18th and during the 19th Centuries. The Second World War destabilised those communities. Many fled the Japanese invasion, whilst others were held prisoners and were interned, mostly in Singapore. After the War, the survivors of these small scattered communities sought refuge in Australia when the White Australia Policy was in full swing. Though they were British subjects, generally of dark complexion, they nevertheless had to persuade the authorities that they were of European or white origin, not black or Asiatics. They were often made to disrobe to 'prove' the true colour of their skin.[28] In the majority of cases local Jewish leaders were required to testify that these Jews were 'of pure Jewish origin without any mixture of Indian blood'.[29] The views of the World Sephardi Federation in London were also officially sought. The Federation, under the presidency of Denzil Sebag Montefiore, was quick to assure the Australian authorities that those people were Jewish.

The 'new Sephardim' gravitated mostly to Sydney and Melbourne, where they organised themselves into separate congregations and conducted their own religious services and eventually established their respective Associations.

In 1855 a man named Saleh Aharon Khazzum, a native of Baghdad, came to Sydney after living a few years in Calcutta. At the end of the 19th century three of his grandsons — Jacob, Moshe and David — came to Sydney. Jacob stayed on, but his two brothers returned to Calcutta. It was Jacob Aaron who in 1962 laid the foundation stone of the first Sephardi Synagogue in New South Wales.[30] In 1948, Jacob's nephew, Reuben, came to Sydney, also from Calcutta, followed in 1950 by his brother Aaron, who is the author of *Sephardim in Australia and New Zealand*.

After 1978 a number of Sephardim came to Sydney from England, Egypt, Baghdad, Calcutta and Singapore, but the bulk of the present community came after the Second World War. Members of the community were divided as to whether or not to maintain their own ancestral tradition and form their own congregation, or integrate fully within the established Ashkenazi community. Rabbi Dr. I. Porush was amongst the leading proponents of 'saving the venerable rituals and customs of this major branch of Jewry for the variegated Jewish life in Australia'.[31]

The community proceeded to hold the first High Holy Day Services in 1947 and annually thereafter, and to establish the New South Wales Association of Sephardim in May 1951. Since then, Sephardim in New South Wales have gone from strength to strength despite the occasional eruptions of divisions or disagreements. In February 1961, Denzil Sebag Montefiore, then President of the World Sephardi Federation, visited Sydney. He was apprised of the efforts to build a Sephardi synagogue and, as a true believer in preserving Sephardi culture, he made a financial contribution and was instrumental in enlisting the support of the World Sephardi Federation as well. Jacob Aaron also made a handsome donation, and the foundation stone of the Synagogue was laid by him in July 1962. The Association received a further substantial donation from Dr. Nessim Gaon, the new President of the World Sephardi Federation, earmarked for the building of the Ladies' Gallery named after his wife, Renee. The Gallery was officially opened by the Haham Dr. Solomon Gaon on 30 November 1975.[32]

The Sephardi Association of Victoria was formed on 1 November 1965. About fifty people attended the inaugural meeting at the home of Ken and Helen Bekhor in Cotham Road, Kew. Reuben Aaron, then President of the New South Wales Association, and Rabbi R. Lubofsky were guest speakers; the widow of the late Jacob Aaron of Sydney was among the honoured guests. Maurice Tuetta was elected first president, followed by Anwar Jawary in 1968, then by this author in 1972. I served for five years until the Sassoon Yehuda Synagogue was built and officially opened in March 1977 by the Right Honourable Malcolm Fraser, then Prime Minister of Australia. This was the first time in the history of this country that an incumbent Prime Minister officially opened a synagogue. The significance of the occasion was emphasised in the first passage of Mr. Fraser's address, when he said:

> It is a very great honour and pleasure to be here today to open the first Sephardi Synagogue and Communal Centre in Victoria. I have searched for other words to describe the significance of this centre, but I have been able to find none better than those used by Gad Ben-Meir in his letter inviting me to be here: 'The significance of the achievement lies not in the size or splendour of the centre — it is in fact small and modest — but in its being an expression of the opportunity our free country offers its citizens to maintain their age-old traditions and their religious and cultural individuality'.
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> Australia has afforded this opportunity to people from every country in the world. In our age, when religious racial and cultural repression still exists, this opportunity is by no means an unimportant one; but it has been the dedication of the Australian Jewish community and of other ethnic communities around Australia to maintaining their heritage which has enabled the opportunity to be taken up, which has enabled Australia to develop increasingly as a multi-cultural society.[33]

Some months before the Sassoon Yehuda Synagogue was completed, the very Rev. Haham Dr. Solomon Gaon, then Chief Sephardi Rabbi of England and the British Commonwealth, came for a visit. It was the first time that any Sephardi Chief Rabbi ever came to these shores, and both organisations in Sydney and in Melbourne were very pleased to receive him. Rabbi Gaon and, before him, Denzil Sebag Montefiore, were instrumental in extending financial assistance towards the building; but the Synagogue would not have been built were it not for the contribution made by Albert Yehuda of Melbourne. Mr. Yehuda was born in Baghdad, Iraq, lived in India in the forties, and settled in Melbourne in 1948. In recognition of his very generous and timely donation the Synagogue was named in perpetuity after his late father, Sassoon Yehuda, also a native of Baghdad.

On 7 April 1987, Malcolm Fraser returned to the Synagogue to help celebrate its tenth anniversary. It was a splendid occasion, indeed historic, in that the two Consuls-General of Egypt and Israel were for the first time sitting side by side, as honoured guests. In a way, it was a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel.

The existence of two Associations striving towards achieving the same objectives in Sydney and in Melbourne inevitably led to the establishment of the Sephardi Federation of Australia. The Inaugural Conference, held in Sydney in March 1971, adopted the Constitution and elected the first Executive. The birth of the Federation was not without some dramatic moments when conflicts about leadership and direction threatened the outcome.

The Federation for a while lived up to expectations, in that it gave Sephardim a voice nationally and internationally; unfortunately, it lies dormant at the present time, mainly because the present leadership in Victoria is, in my opinion, short-sighted.

Sephardim in the smaller States remain limited in numbers. They have not been able or willing to date to establish their own congregations and it is very doubtful that they will unless, of course, more Orthodox Sephardim settle there. The prospects of that happening appear to be remote. The position in New South Wales and Victoria is quite different.

The survival of Sephardim as a community in New South Wales is beyond doubt. Their numbers, the quality of their leadership and the variety of their religious, educational and social services will ensure their durability as a vibrant traditional Orthodox community. They are well integrated within the Jewish community and have their representatives sitting on the boards of various major Jewish organisations. For the most part of their congregational existence they had a Sephardi Rabbi who was instrumental in propagating the Sephardi *Minhag* and attracting the young. Because of their numbers they are able to retain a Rabbi; something that eluded Victorian Sephardim and the smaller congregations in other States. It is true that the community had its fair share of dissension and personality conflicts; all of that is now water under the (Sydney Harbour) bridge. The Eastern section of the community which seceded from the New South Wales Association of Sephardim now co-exists harmoniously with it. It is possible that within the next five years the Association will build a bigger Synagogue to cater for their expanding religious, educational and cultural needs.

Until two years ago, the Sephardi Association of Victoria managed to united the Sephardi community as a constructive constituent of the general Jewish community and its roof bodies. The common aspiration to build a synagogue was the prime motivation during the first decade. The inauguration of the Sassoon Yehuda Syna-

gogue in September 1976, its official opening in March 1977, and its tenth anniversary celebration in April 1987 must be rated as its crowning achievements. Unfortunately, the unity of purpose which underlay that unique achievement was suddenly shattered, hopefully not irrevocably, by the new leadership of the Association which took office in February 1987. The seeds of division and dissension they have sown brought about the alienation of almost the entirety of the Iraqi constituency and of the intelligentsia.

Even without this recent upheaval, Fiona Kaufman concluded in her honours thesis that it was 'unrealistic to hope for or expect a revival of Sephardi culture in the years to come, for such a culture is indeed foreign to those second-generation Sephardim brought up in Australia'.[34] Her conclusion was based on the tiny number of Sephardim, the limited prospects of their increase through procreation and immigration and the inevitability that, within an Ashkenazi-dominant culture, the younger Sephardi who does not usually attend religious services will, in varying degrees, absorb Ashkenazism rather than Sephardism. The accelerating rate of intermarriage between Sephardim and Ashkenazim is indicative of this sociological trend.

Contemporary Sephardism cannot rest on the laurels of the Golden Age. Each new generation of Sephardim must cultivate its own creativity by drawing on its cultural roots and assimilating modern sophistication. To do that, the community needs leaders whose clear vision and intellectual vigour are capable of inspiring the young to maintain their cultural individuality. The present leadership is, in my opinion, poorly equipped to cultivate such a vision. The last two years were spent in a vain attempt to demolish a synagogue which served the community well over the last twelve years and build another nobody really needs or can really afford. In the meantime, the silent membership remains entangled in the muddle and divisions those attempts have seemingly created. The push to 'Yeshivah territory' is bound to radicalise Sephardi Orthodoxy and alienate the majority who desire to preserve Sephardi culture and liturgy without the imposition of *Beth Shamai* practices.

I remain convinced, however, that Sephardim in Victoria will survive as a community. I do not consider 1,200–1,500 members of a community as 'tiny'[35] or too small to survive. Unlike their predecessors who could not bequeath a congregational legacy, Sephardim in Victoria have, I believe, irreversibly asserted their cultural individuality, and, unless they continue to suffer dissension and poor direction, Sephardim will resist the pressures of total assimilation into the dominant Ashkenazi culture.

NOTES

1. This estimate is based partly on *The Demography of the Australian Jewish Community 1981* by W. D. Rubinstein, Associate Professor of Social Sciences, Deakin University, published in June 1986 by the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs, and partly on estimates and observations made by leaders of the Sephardi Associations in New South Wales and Victoria. Out of the total, 2,000 are of Iraqi origin; the balance from Egypt, India, Singapore, Persia, Israel and other North African and Middle Eastern countries. See *Yisrael Rhammana: Kinship and Community Among Jews of Iraqi Origin in Sydney, Australia* by Myer Samra, University of Sydney. See also, The Sephardi Voice: The Sephardi Community of Victoria 1800–1984, a Study, by Fiona Kaufman, chapter 3, pp. 22–25.
2. Aaron Aaron was one of the founders of the New South Wales Association of Sephardim and its first Chairman. The book was published by the author in 1979.
3. Myer Samra was the Secretary and Executive Member of the New South Wales Association of Sephardim. The articles referred to are *Yisrael Rhammana* (see 1 above), and *The Immigration of Sephardi Jews to Australia*, University of Sydney.

4. Henry Shaw, The Sephardim: their Origin, History, Tradition and Culture, Prahran College of Advanced Education.

5. The Sephardi Voice: the Sephardi Community of Victoria 1800–1984, a Study. This was an Honours Thesis, 1984, University of Melbourne, Department of Middle Eastern Studies.

6. *The Sephardim of England*, Albert M. Hyamson, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1951, pp. 1–2.

7. The Marranos are Iberian Jews who had adopted Christianity more or less voluntarily, often under great pressure, and had remained in their homes only to find sooner or later that despite their submission, life in supportable conditions was impossible and that the choice lay no longer between partial conversion and exile, but between complete renunciation of their faith and death at the stake. Often they met the latter fate.

8. Hyamson, p. 8.

9. Bevis Marks was opened in 1701. It was on the occasion of its 250th anniversary that Albert M. Hyamson wrote his book *The Sephardim of England* in 1951.

10. Benjamin Disraeli was born in London on 21 December 1804, the eldest son of Isaac D'Israeli and Maria Basevi. His birth was registered in the book of records of Bevis Marks. His grandfather, Benjamin D'Israeli, immigrated to England from Cento in Italy in 1748 and became a member of the London Stock Exchange. Isaac D'Israeli was a *Yahid* (member) of the congregation but was not interested in the affairs of the Jewish community and his attendance at services was very occasional. His real interest was literature. In 1813 the *Mahamad* (Board of Management) elected him as a *Parnass* without his knowledge or consent. The *Ascamot* (Constitution) of the synagogue enabled the *Mahamad* so to elect and to impose a fine if a *Yahid* declined the honour. Isaac of course declined but refused to pay the fine of £40 stating, truthfully, that no *Yahid* could be less qualified for office than himself. He offered to continue to pay his usual contribution to the synagogue's funds. His refusal was ignored and in 1817 he was asked again to pay the fine. He replied regretting that the *Mahamad* was not satisfied to allow him to remain a passive member and he resigned. For himself he was content to remain outside all religious communities but he had to do something for the children who were attending non-Jewish schools; Benjamin was baptised in the Church of St. Andrew's at the age of thirteen. As a Jew he could not have been elected to Parliament until 1858 but because of his baptism he was able to enter Parliament in 1837 as the Conservative Member for Maidstone in Kent. It can safely be asserted that, but for the *Mahamad's* insistence on payment of the fine, Benjamin Disraeli could never have risen to be Prime Minister of England (Hyamson pp. 242–245). See also, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 15th Edition, Vol. 5, pp. 898–900.

11. Henry Shaw, p. 8.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

13. *Otzar Hammakhshava Shel Hayahdut (Treasury of Jewish Thought)* in 7 volumes published by Mahbarot Lesifrut and Yediot Aharonot, Israel. Reviewed by Nessim Rejwan in the *Jerusalem Post Weekly* and reprinted in *Kol Sepharad*, May 1966, World Sephardi Federation, London.

14. Aaron, p. 13.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–48.

27. *Historical Essays*, Australian Jewish Historical Society, 1988, pp. 29–35.

28. Myer Samra, *The Immigration of Sephardi Jews to Australia*, p. 115.

29. Myer Samra, 'The Early History of the New South Wales Association of Sephardim', *Historical Essays*, Australian Jewish Historical Society, 1988, p. 30.

30. Aaron, p. 93.

31. Israel Porush, *The House of Israel*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1977, p. 215.

32. Aaron, p. 247.

33. *Sassoon Yehuda Sephardi Synagogue, 10th anniversary celebration 1977–1987*, p. 22.

34. Fiona Kaufman, pp. 55–61.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 58.