

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES
ASSOCIATION OF SEPHARDIM
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE ROLE
PLAYED BY RABBI DR ISRAEL PORUSH

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Reporting on a function held in July, 1987 to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the Sephardi Synagogue in Sydney, the *Wentworth Courier* noted that one of the guest speakers had been "Melbourne Sephardi Leader Rabbi Dr Israel Porush".¹ Members of the Jewish community in Australia would be aware of Rabbi Porush's distinguished career and should realise that in fact he is not a Sephardi. We are therefore inclined to smile at the newspaper's reference to the Rabbi.

And yet in some sense the *Courier* was not mistaken to describe Rabbi Porush as a "Sephardi leader", for surely the person who holds the distinction of being the first president of the New South Wales Association of Sephardim, albeit in an honorary capacity, merits such a description.

That indeed is the case with Rabbi Porush. The encouragement and support which he gave to the establishment of a Sephardi community in Sydney is remembered with affection, and at the Sephardi Synagogue's silver jubilee celebrations Rabbi Porush was the guest of honour.

In his book "The House of Israel", Rabbi Porush alludes to the role he played in helping to organise the Sydney Sephardi community. In the aftermath of the Israeli War of Independence and the Suez Crisis of 1956, ancient Jewish communities in the Arab lands were destroyed. According to Rabbi Porush:

A few hundred families found their way to Australia, notably Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. There was a division of opinion among these *Sephardim*: some advocated integration in the established *Ashkenazi* community for the sake of unity, others sought to form their own association or Congregation in order to perpetuate the *Sephardi Minhag* or Tradition, which their fathers had maintained for centuries. In Sydney the numbers were considerable — about two thousand, I was told — and there were many *Sephardim* who were determined to transplant their tradition to the new land and create thereby a rallying point based on affinity for these newcomers who might otherwise feel uprooted and drift away from Judaism altogether. It was partly because of this latter consideration, and partly because I was convinced that there was merit in saving the venerable rituals and customs of this major branch of Jewry for the variegated Jewish life in Australia, that the Great Synagogue and I gave our whole-hearted support to the formation of the Association of *Sephardim* in 1952, which eventually succeeded in building a fine Synagogue and hall in Woollahra which I had the pleasure of consecrating in July, 1962.²

This passage gives a succinct account of the growth of the Sephardi community in post-war Sydney, culminating in the erection of the Sephardi Synagogue, and highlighting a debate among Sephardi Jews concerning the extent they should be accepting the established customs of their Ashkenazi brethren in Sydney, or retaining their own ancestral traditions; whether they should strive to form their own institutions, including a synagogue, or make use of those of the wider Jewish community. In this chapter I shall attempt to amplify Rabbi Porush's account, both in terms of the debate within the community, and the history of Sephardi communal organisation prior to the dedication of the Sephardi Synagogue.

Whilst we are here concerned with the period following the Second World War, this was not the beginning of Sephardi settlement in Australia. Several of the Jewish convicts who came on the First Fleet were apparently Sephardi, and Sephardi Jews were prominent among the free settlers who arrived in the first half of the nineteenth century.³ Some of these settlers were clearly proud of their Sephardi heritage as during the 1850s a Sephardi *minyán* functioned, at times with difficulty, alongside the larger Ashkenazi congregation in the Melbourne Synagogue.⁴

The Sephardi communities in Australia today are not the lineal descendants of these early beginnings but spring from more recent immigration. Whereas the early Sephardi settlers came from the Spanish and Portuguese congregations in Britain, the post-war Sephardi immigrants have been largely Jews from Egypt, Jews of Iraqi origin who had been living in India and the Far East, and others who had been settled in Israel.

Before the Suez Crisis, Jews from India, Burma, Singapore and Shanghai were the main Sephardi immigrants. These communities in Asia had been established by Jews from Iraq in the late eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century, in important trading centres under the aegis of British imperial power. World War II dislodged these communities. Many Jews fled the Japanese invasion and others were interned.⁵ After the war, their life's work destroyed, many sought to re-establish themselves in a new environment. At the same time, as the former colonies achieved independence and embarked on programmes that favoured their indigenous citizens, opportunities for the members of these small, scattered, immigrant Jewish communities declined, helping to encourage the exodus.

Those who made their way to Australia arrived at a time when the White Australia Policy was in operation and all but prevented any immigration from Asia. Even though they had the status of British subjects, coming from Asia, these Jews found themselves having to persuade the authorities that, nonetheless, they were not "Asiatics" but European or white in racial origin.⁶ The decisions made by boarding officers and other officials frequently seemed irrational and arbitrary. One person might be granted permanent residence in the country whereas a brother or a sister would be refused the right to enter. Often, these Jewish immigrants were made to disrobe partially so that the "real" colour of their skin could be discerned.

One man, born in Calcutta, related how he and a friend from Burma landed in Australia in 1947, together. The man from Burma was allowed to enter the country without any questions; not so the man from Calcutta, who asked the official to explain the reason for treating the two of them differently. The boarding officer smiled, placed his index fingers to the side of his eyes, raising the flesh to make the eyes slant, and said, "Because he's obviously not Burmese". By implication, then, my informant from Calcutta could well be a native Indian.

If the authorities were not convinced of the racial background of these Jews from Asia, nor indeed were many of the lay leaders of the Australian Jewish community who found it difficult to aver that these people from Asia, claiming to be Jewish, were "of pure Jewish origin and descent without any mixture of Indian blood", or words to similar effect. By contrast, Rabbi Porush had no qualms about signing such testimonials. For Rabbi Porush, these Jews from Asia with their distinct cultural and religious traditions did not seem so strange. They were indeed representatives of the Sephardi tradition which had a clear place in the Jewish world.

Gradually a Sephardi community began to emerge in Sydney, taking in the immigrants from the various Asian colonies. Even though they came from different countries, their common ultimate origins meant that many had kinship ties with one another. The home of Mr Kelly Moses (Khedhoori Moosafi), a businessman born in Baghdad who had married in Rangoon and now resided in North Bondi, came to be something of a community centre.

Sephardi Jews came there to socialise, to play backgammon, to plan for the future of the community.

In 1947, Mr Nissim Moalem from Shanghai and Mr Sas Sassoon who was born in Singapore organised prayers in the Sephardi *minhag* for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* at the Maccabean Hall in Darlinghurst.⁷ Similar arrangements were made each subsequent year. Funds were raised through the hire of seats and through pledges made for participation in the privileges associated with the services. The money raised paid for the hire of the hall, and any surplus was forwarded to charities in Israel.

The success of these annual services stimulated an interest in forming a more permanent group, whether to hold more frequent services, to increase the opportunities for Sephardim to socialise with one another, or to lobby for the removal of restrictions on Sephardi immigration. But a number of the influential elders in the community were wary of having a formal organisation which might require administrative paperwork and the payment of subscription fees. They even preferred the annual services to be organised on an ad-hoc basis rather than making clear formal arrangements in advance. On one occasion, Mr Maurice Adams ('Awad), a journalist from Egypt, did call a meeting to propose the formation of a Sephardi organisation. Whilst some interest was evident, this attempt did not succeed.

In 1951, with encouragement from Mr Max Friedman, general secretary of the State Zionist Council, Mr Aaron Aaron, a recent immigrant from Calcutta, sought to establish an organisation of Sephardi Jews. Mr Friedman pledged to support the new group with publicity, stationery and secretarial services.⁸ Mr Aaron approached Rabbi Porush for support, and the Rabbi agreed to chair the first meeting.⁹

This meeting was held at the Maccabean Hall on 21st May, 1951, under the auspices of the State Zionist Council. Rabbi Porush and Mr Friedman addressed the meeting and an association with the title "New South Wales Hebrew Association" was formed. A committee was appointed, comprising Mr Aaron Aaron, chairman; Mr Ivan Morris, vice-chairman; Mr Hugh Rassaby, honorary secretary; Mrs Sally Morris, assistant honorary secretary; Mr Gilbert Solomon, honorary treasurer, and Mr Eze Cohen, assistant honorary treasurer.¹⁰ Rabbi Porush accepted the position of honorary president, effectively the patron of the group. In this capacity, his counsel was sought whenever the Association had a difficult issue to resolve, and individual members of the Sephardi community also approached the Rabbi with their personal problems, practical and spiritual. Rabbi Porush's patience and his willingness to listen and offer guidance when appropriate endeared him to the community.

When news of the formation of the new group reached London, the Haham, Rabbi Dr Solomon Gaon, Chief Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregations of London and the British Commonwealth, wrote to extend his good wishes to the new group and to offer his assistance wherever possible.¹¹ The Haham's encouragement was greatly appreciated. In subsequent years his assistance was sought from time to time and the Haham maintained his interest in the development of the new community.

The selection of such a non-descript name as the "New South Wales Hebrew Association" indicates that the members of the community were not yet certain of how to style themselves. There had been a great deal of debate about what the group should be called. People did not want a name which might associate them with "things eastern" as all things eastern were considered "unsavoury" at the time, hence the selection of "some obscure, innocuous, not very definitive name."

However they were already being identified as "Sephardim" by the wider Jewish community. Following the announcement of the meeting, Dr Hans Kimmel wrote in *The Sydney Jewish News*:

Whilst the aloofness of the Sephardim is often attributed to their pride, I am rather inclined to explain it that with extreme modesty they believe that their contribution to communal life would not find appropriate appreciation by the community at large. If my interpretation is correct, then I hasten to stake that the Sephardim are committing a great mistake. By virtue of their history and tradition, the Sephardim are well justified to add to our communal life, strength and colour which will stand us in good stead.¹²

In this brief passage, Dr Kimmel captured, in a light-hearted manner, the dilemmas and the contradictions of a Sephardi identity for this group. The notions of "aloofness" and "pride" suggest the aristocratic conception frequently associated with the Jews of Spain, whereas at the same time the "extreme modesty" and lack of "appropriate appreciation" highlight the insecurity, even inferiority, felt by a group of Jews of Middle-Eastern origin in what appeared to be an unfriendly social environment. Similarly, the use of the word "colour" is a humorous if oblique reference to the problems that Sephardi Jews were having with immigration in the light of the White Australia Policy.¹³

On 14th December, 1953, Mr Aaron circulated an invitation to some three hundred Sephardi residents of Sydney to attend a general meeting. Mr Aaron noted, "For a number of years several attempts have been made to form an organisation which would cater for the need of our people spiritually, socially, and culturally in a Jewish direction. Unfortunately, these ideals of ours did not materialise due to some unknown reason".¹⁴

On this occasion, the general meeting, held on 6th January, 1954, was successful, with several dignitaries and fifty-eight "members of the community" in attendance, and the Association was securely established. Mr Gerald de Vahl Davis, vice-president of the N.S.W. Jewish Board of Deputies, brought greetings from his president and urged Sephardi Jews to participate actively in all the concerns of the Jewish community, indicating that he would like to see the group affiliating with the Board.¹⁵ Rabbi Porush again accepted the honorary position of president, a position he held until 1957. Two elder women of the community, who had been resident in Australia from around the turn of century, Mesdames Jessy Grant and Flora Gubbay, were honoured with the nominal status of vice-presidents, in recognition of the assistance they had given to more recent immigrants.

The name "NSW Association of Sephardim" was adopted on the recommendation of Rabbi Porush.¹⁶ One gentleman recalled, "I remember Rabbi Porush saying, in his very direct words, 'I don't know why you're beating about the bush. The fact is all of you are Sephardim and the Sephardim have a proud heritage, so why not call yourself the NSW Association of Sephardim?'" Another participant proudly recalled that Rabbi Porush had told the meeting that the Sephardim were the "princes" of the Jewish people, thereby adding prestige to the name which he was urging on the group. The new name was accepted unanimously once it had been proposed by Rabbi Porush, although a third informant suggests that until then the members of the community had "never wanted to be known as Sephardim".

Once the Association was established, it took over responsibility for the High Holyday services. Gradually a Sephardi *minyan* was organised during Passover and the other festivals, along with *Selihot* prayers during the Hebrew month of Ellul. The Association had more consistent success with social functions such as card parties and dinner dances. In 1955 the Association held its first Purim Ball. Guests of Honour were the Minister for Israel, Mr Mordekhai Nurock, and Mrs Nurock, the senior vice-president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Mr Sydney Einfeld, and Mrs Einfeld, and the Federal member for Phillip, Mr J. Fitzgerald, with Mrs Fitzgerald. The popularity of that ball has led the Association to stage a Purim Ball every year since then, and to this day it is regarded as a major highlight of the Sephardi social calendar.

Another area of activity for the Association during its early years was in efforts to overcome the immigration restrictions faced by Sephardi Jews. Certainly individual

Sephardis made representations on their own behalf and on behalf of their close relatives who sought to be united with them in Australia. But the Association also sought to enlist the support of the organised Australian Jewish community. Dr Lotte Fink, chairman of the NSW Board of Deputies Overseas Jewry Committee, attended a meeting of the Association to learn of the background of the Sephardim, to hear of the problems they faced, and to suggest an approach that might be made for sympathetic treatment by immigration authorities.¹⁷

The Association had the support of the Board of Deputies to raise the issue at the Executive Council of Australian Jewry Conference that year, and in 1956, Mr Sydney Einfeld, as president of the Federation of Australian Jewish Welfare Societies and senior vice-president of the Executive Council, arranged a meeting with the Secretary of the Immigration Department, Mr (later Sir) Tasman Heyes at which the chairman and the secretary of the NSW Association of Sephardim, Mr Aaron Aaron and Mr Monte Moss respectively, would have an opportunity to put their case directly.

The existence of the Association proved to be of value for Egyptian Jewish refugees who found their way to Australia in 1957 and 1958. With encouragement from the Australian Jewish Welfare Society which supplied the Association with details of Egyptian Jewish immigrants, the Association took an "outreach" role, to enlist them as members and to offer assistance in settling in. In particular, the Association was able to help many of these new immigrants obtain their first job in the country. The plywood firm Ralph Symonds and Co. was particularly co-operative in this regard, Mr Moss being the son-in-law of the founder of the firm. In 1957 a number of Egyptian Jews were co-opted onto the Association's board of management, and the Association also took up the matter of Egyptian Jewish immigration with Mr Einfeld, the recognized spokesman of the Jewish community in respect of immigration.¹⁸

It is perhaps a curious fact that the establishment of the Association helped to integrate Sephardi Jews into the Australian Jewish community rather than making them into a separate community. The very beginnings of the group, in which prominent Ashkenazi communal leaders such as Rabbi Porush and Mr Friedman, Mr Einfeld and Mr de Vahl Davis played a crucial role, ensured that the Association would have an orientation to the local Jewish community, with the NSW Association of Sephardim serving as the Sephardi voice on communal issues. This orientation was highlighted by the motto emblazoned in Hebrew on the Association's letterhead paper, *Kol Yisrael Haverim* ("All Jews are friends/comrades"), proclaiming a sense of responsibility of one Jew for another and a shared destiny for all Jews.

With such a perspective, it is little surprise that the Association sought representation in the various fora of the local Jewish community. Mr Friedman records, "On the 8th December, 1953, (I) had the great satisfaction of welcoming the Association to representation on the State Zionist Council",¹⁹ and the Association participated enthusiastically in the Council's project to raise funds for the Queen Elizabeth Coronation Forest in Israel. Similarly, in 1954 the Association joined the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, the "parliament" of Jewish organisations in New South Wales, and as we have seen it was to the Board of Deputies that the Association turned in the first instance to seek support for Sephardi immigration.

In 1958, when the Board of Deputies was in financial difficulties, the Association took the initiative to levy its members four shillings per annum and urged other communal organisations to do the same.²⁰ Although most other groups did not institute such a levy, nonetheless the Sephardi Association continued to do so for several years, with the approval of its members.²¹ The Association also joined the NSW Board of Jewish Education and the United Orthodox Synagogues, even before the Sephardi Synagogue was built, and it

participated annually in the United Israel Appeal.

With this range of activities, the Association acquired a degree of visibility and respectability within the Sydney Jewish community. And whilst Rabbi Porush has correctly reported on disagreements within the Sephardi community about the need for a distinct Sephardi organisation, the Association had won the support and the approval of those it claimed to represent. As one member who had been sceptical of the value of a Sephardi organisation was later to observe, "It is the first time we've ever had a united community. Even in Calcutta we didn't have a united community. The rich and poor were always separated. For the first time there is no separation between the rich or poor, or anybody. We are all one."

But beneath this unity, disagreements still remained about the direction in which the Association should be heading, and the best means for achieving those ends. For some, the dream of a Sephardi Synagogue remained a high priority. As Mr Nissim Moalem, one of the initiators of the Sephardi services in 1947 recalls, "During the High Holy days we were organising our own services. The rest of the year I was attending the Western Suburbs Synagogue at Newtown. I longed to see a synagogue of our own, where we could follow the service without having to strain ourselves the way we do in an Ashkenazi synagogue."

Others, more interested in the social value of a Sephardi Association, preferred to seek a club house, and indeed the "Old Constitution" of the Association from 1958 apparently envisaged that the Association's premises would be a club house rather than a synagogue. Certainly many members would have liked to have had both a club room and a prayer hall of their own, but club facilities seemed easier to achieve. Others also doubted the wisdom of building a synagogue to which Sephardis alone would go, isolating them and their children from contact with other Jews.

In 1959, when Mr and Mrs Jacob Aaron offered to donate to the Association land for a synagogue, these debates were re-kindled. Eventually, at the annual general meeting held in that year, disagreement over the trusteeship of the proposed synagogue sparked off the resignation of some forty-nine members, approximately a third of the total, and the offer of the land was withdrawn.²²

Those who resigned from the Association formed a new group, the Eastern Jewish Association, which to this day has continued to organise services in the Sephardi tradition during the High Holydays, and social functions for its members. But the leaders of the continuing NSW Association of Sephardim were more keen than ever to see the erection of a Sephardi synagogue. In 1960, with the help of Mr I. Golovsky, president of the Central Synagogue, the Association was given the use of the Central Synagogue's boardroom to hold regular Saturday morning services.

In July, 1962, the Association of Sephardim saw the fulfilment of its goals, with the dedication of a Sephardi Community Centre and Prayer Hall, a single building which was intended to cater for the two kinds of use required by the Sephardim, in Fletcher Street, Woollahra. Even so, the building has generally been known as the Sephardi Synagogue. The purchase of the property had been made possible through the generosity of Mr Denzil Sebag-Montefiore, president of the World Sephardi Federation and an elder of London's Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Congregation, who visited Australia in 1961.²³ The funds for the building were raised from members of the Association, and once again Mr and Mrs Jacob Aaron revealed their continued commitment to the cause through their substantial donations.

In the twenty-five years since the opening of the Sephardi Synagogue, it has seen many changes. A large influx of Sephardi immigrants from Bombay and Singapore during the 1960s necessitated extensions in 1970 and 1975. Today, with seating for around five hundred people during the High Holydays, demand exceeds capacity and many members

talk of the need for further expansion. The Synagogue also boasts a daily *minyan*, morning and evening, certainly an achievement in Sydney today where many larger congregations have problems organising regular weekday prayers.

In 1963 Rabbi Simon Silas was appointed as the minister to the Synagogue, maintaining that position until 1980. From 1984 to 1986 Rabbi Yaakov Shemaria served the congregation. During periods when the synagogue has not had a rabbi of its own, it has been fortunate to have had the friendship and support of Rabbi Dr Yehoshua Kemelman, head of the Sydney Beth Din, who has been prepared to ascend the pulpit when required, and to offer guidance to the management committee as a friend of the Sephardi community. The Synagogue has also been fortunate to have had many experienced lay readers, capable of conducting services proficiently. The number of these lay readers is yet another mark of distinction for the Synagogue in the Australian environment.

In 1987 the New South Wales Association of Sephardim and the Sephardi Synagogue had much to celebrate, and who better to celebrate with than one who had been involved with the founding of the Association, its first president, the one who had consecrated the Synagogue in 1962, inducted Rabbi Silas in 1963, and participated in all the major events in the history of the community; who indeed better than that "Melbourne Sephardi leader", Rabbi Dr Israel Porush.

NOTES

1. *Wentworth Courier*, 15th July, 1987, p. 2, "Synagogue marks silver anniversary".
 2. Israel Porush, *The House of Israel* (Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1977) p. 215.
 3. See *Australian Jewish Times*, 9th July, 1987, p. 2 — "Ancient traditions flourish in Sydney's East."
 4. Fiona Kaufman, *The Sephardi Voice: The Sephardi Community of Victoria 1800-1984* (B.A. thesis, Dept of Middle Eastern Studies, Melbourne University, 1984), pp. 11-12. These services apparently lasted from 1854 to 1873.
 5. Moshe Yegar, "Jewish Communities in the Far East", *Forum*, 1980, No. 38, pp. 141-154, provides a brief account of the history of each community. Eze Nathan, *The History of Jews in Singapore 1830-1945* (Herbilu, Singapore, 1986) gives a detailed first hand account of interment in Singapore.
 6. See Myer Samra, *Yisrael Rhammana: Constructions of Identity among Iraqi Jews in Sydney, Australia* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Sydney, 1987), Chapter 5.
 7. See "Sephardim in Australia: An Australian Jewish Times Supplement", 22nd October, 1970, and Aaron Aaron, *The Sephardim of Australia and New Zealand* (Sydney, 1979), p. 50.
 8. Aaron, pp. 50-51.
 9. In discussing this point with me, Mr Aaron Aaron stressed the interest which Mrs Porush evinced in the formation of an association for Sephardi Jews, and her encouragement of Rabbi Porush's involvement. Aaron, p. 54 alludes to his discussions with Mrs Porush on the subject "over a cup of tea and cookies", "while waiting for the Rabbi to be free owing to previous engagements".
 10. Aaron, p. 51.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
 13. See Cecil Roth, "Where the Sephardim Hidalgos?", *Commentary* (1955), 20, pp. 125-131, for a discussion of the notion of the aristocratic status of the Spanish Jews. Compare with Nathan, p. 58, commenting on his contract with Ashkenazi Jews in Singapore: "In my youth I was very aware that a division existed; a tone of disparagement was easily detected when certain European Jews referred to the Jews from India as Arab or Oriental".
 14. Aaron, p. 55.
 15. Minutes of the first annual general meeting, in NSW Association of Sephardim, Folder 6, Archive of Australian Judaica, Sydney University; also reproduced in Aaron, pp. 56-57.
 16. *Idem*.
 17. See Minutes of NSW Association of Sephardim, 18th August, 1955, Folder 6, Archive of Australian Judaica.
 18. Aaron, p. 66.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 66. Also see Minutes of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, Volume 5, Executive, 21st January, 1958, p. 113.
 21. See NSW J.B.D. Minutes, Volume 5, Board, 19th May 1959, p. 256, where a motion was passed that other organisations should impose a similar levy. At the NSW Association of Sephardim annual general meeting on 18th December, 1960 (Minutes, Volume 2, p. 11) a motion calling for the abolition of the levy was defeated.
 22. Minutes of the 8th annual general meeting, 18th December, 1960.
 23. Aaron, p. 75.
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