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The York Street (Sydney) Synagogue.

Commemorative Address on Occasion of Centenary—Delivered
at the Great Synagogue, Sabbath, April 18th, 1942.

By RABBI Dr. I. PORUSH.

Chief Minister of the Great Synagogue, Sydney.

“Israel is the author of the idea of history,” writes a contemporary savant. To study the past is a Biblical instruction which is stressed in the Farewell Song of Moses to the Children of Israel: “Remember the days of old, understand the years of each generation.” According to this quotation, history has a twofold aspect: To remember the days, i.e., to search and register in detail the chain of facts and occurrences which fill the chronicles of times gone by; and to understand the years, i.e., to perceive across the generations the wider connexions and the higher meaning of happenings in the story of man. Without minute research into dates and facts, any reflection upon the historical sense of things will necessarily be vague. The true significance of factual record, however, can be revealed only against the background of time. The fuller meaning can be understood only in the setting of universal affairs and tendencies.

In to-day's Commemoration of the Centenary of the Foundation of the York Street Synagogue—a historic incident in the annals of the young Jewish community of Australia—we should accordingly, in the first instance, register the rather scanty knowledge we possess of that

occasion and of the men associated with it. Secondly, we should contemplate retrospectively and prospectively from the elevated platform that the passage of a hundred years has built the Jewish-universal significance of the event we celebrate: THE FOUNDATION OF THE FIRST SYNAGOGUE SPECIFICALLY BUILT FOR DIVINE WORSHIP IN AUSTRALIA.

The beginnings of Jewish communal life in Sydney go back to 1817, when some twenty Jews lived in this city. Though a Chevra Kadisha had been constituted, no regular services were held until 1828, when Phillip Joseph Cohen offered the use of his house in George Street for meetings for worship on Sabbaths and Holy Days. Still, there was no organised congregation and no public place of worship. In 1831, the Sydney congregation was formally constituted. A building in George Street was secured. Later, another in Bridge Street was leased and converted into a Synagogue. There, as well as at times in various private houses, regular services were held.

In the meantime, the community had grown in numbers and substance, and the need was felt for the erection of a worthy and spacious House of God. Expression was given to this need in 1839 in an appeal for funds circularised among "the members of the Faith of Israel in the Colony of New South Wales." On Sunday, 15th September, 1839, corresponding to 25th Ellul 5599, at a special general meeting held in the Sydney Synagogue Chambers under the chairmanship of Isaac Simmons, President of the Sydney Synagogue, it was unanimously resolved "that a subscription be entered into for the erection of a New Synagogue," and the following gentlemen, under the denomination of "The Building Committee," were appointed to act as officers and committee to carry the same into effect:—

Chairman :
MR. ABRAHAM POLACK.

Treasurer :
MR. ISAAC SIMMONS.

Hon. Secretary :
MR. GEORGE MOSS.

Solicitor :
MR. D. POOLE.

Committee :
MR. ABRAHAM ELIAS.
MR. MOSES JOSEPH.
MR. VAIBEN SOLOMON.
MR. JOHN LAZAR.
MR. SAMUEL BENJAMIN,

Of the circulars that were issued inviting the Jews of New South Wales to contribute to the fund, one only is known to have survived. It is in the library of the late President of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, Mr. Percy J. Marks, B.A., a grandson of Mr. Samuel Benjamin, one of the signatories to the appeal. The wording, which will now be quoted in part, bears testimony to the dignity and earnestness of the promoters of the scheme :—

With sincere and heartfelt gratification, we have to announce to the Members of the Faith of Israel, that we, the united few, now residing in the Colony of New South Wales, have, in love to the Eternal God, the God of ABRAHAM, ISAAC, and JACOB, resolved to raise up a Sacred Edifice for the worship of His Holy name; and it is with the like heartfelt gratification that we have to announce that towards the commencing and completion of this goodly work, the resident Members in New South Wales of our community have come forward and given, (as their free will offering) an amount of money already approaching nearly Three thousand pounds, and they confidently anticipate, from the devoted veneration which every Israelite has for his Ancient Faith, that those who reside, whether far or near, will on hearing of this, our work, gladly and promptly respond to the sacred call, and give their utmost aid, and join heart and hand, so as to enable the increasing congregation of this newly inhabited portion of the world, to raise an edifice that shall render honor to Him Who has planted in our souls the unceasing desire of paying adoration to Him, as enjoined from the beginning, to our ancestors.

But before we conclude this, our brief appeal to our Brethren in Faith, we will direct their attention to the objects which we have in contemplation, and which we are desirous to carry forward and into effect, with as little delay as possible :—

1. The Building of a Synagogue, which shall (in after, we pray, at no distant time,) accommodate, with comfort and ease, a Congregation, at least, of Five hundred persons, at their daily service.
2. That the Edifice shall be an elegant and stately one, with Offices and School House attached, and a suitable Dwelling for a Minister of the Mosaic Religion.
3. The internal fittings to correspond with the building.
4. That at least three (Sepher Toras) "Scrolls of the Law," to be deposited in the Ark, be obtained with their necessary appendages.
5. That provision be made, for the maintaining with right dignity and independence, the Minister.
6. That for the purpose of furthering the ends of, and the advancement of our Holy Religion, amongst our Youthful Members, that a competent Master be engaged to instruct them in the Mosaic Religion, and in the ordinary and most approved courses of English Education.

The plans materialised some two and a half years later, and the foundation stone of the new Synagogue in York Street was duly laid by the then President of the Synagogue, Mr. Moses Joseph, on Tuesday, 9th Iyar 5602, corresponding to 19th April, 1842.

The plaque commemorating the laying of the foundation stone has recently been acquired by the Australian Jewish Historical Society. Its text was published in Part VI. of its *Journal*. A photograph of the plaque was included in the Centenary Souvenir recently issued by the Committee.

The York Street Synagogue was situated in the vicinity of Druiitt Street, near the Town Hall. Its opening was solemnised on April 2nd, 1844—8th Nisan 5604—and services were held therein until 1877, when the property was disposed of as part of the scheme to construct the present Great Synagogue.

It was out of the York Street congregation that the senior Synagogue of Australia, the Great Synagogue, grew. The latter has, in fact, retained the original name—BETH YISROEL, "House of Israel." Our congregation has, therefore, especial reason to celebrate this anniversary and to pay a tribute of reverence and respect to the pioneers of Jewish communal life in Sydney.

The general religious and historical significance of this event is aptly reflected in the Hebrew Scriptural Text which adorns the foundation plate: "*And this house which I have set up for a pillar, shall be a House of God.*"* It is taken from the 28th chapter of Genesis, which relates to BETH-EL, the first House of Worship ever erected in homage to the True and Only God.

Jacob had fled from the anger of his disappointed brother. He was an aimless wanderer, heavy-hearted and perplexed as to the future, seeking a new home in a strange land. In the first night of his dreary pilgrimage he perceived the inspiring vision of the Ladder Connecting Heaven and Earth. The ever-sustaining bond between God and man was, as it were, our Patriarch's first inspiration. When he awoke, he made a vow that if he prospered

*The translation on the plate, "And this stone, which I have fixed, shall be, The FOUNDATION STONE of God's House," is a "homiletical licence."

and reached his parental home in peace he would set up a House of Prayer to the God of his fathers. BETH-EL, "*The House of God*," thus became Israel's eternal monument.

"The life of our Patriarchs," goes a Rabbinic saying, "is symbolical of the life of their descendants." In that vision of Jacob we may perceive the *leit motif* of Jewish history throughout the ages. God then promised Jacob: "*And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north and to the south, and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*"

Israel's fate is a confirmation of that Divine Promise. The seed of Jacob has indeed been dispersed over the four corners of the earth. After spreading to the West, the East and the North, Israel has planted a sprout of new Jewish life in the South.

In this part of the world, the sons of Jacob have indeed been found in the ranks of the pioneers of this continent. They were among its earliest builders and shapers. "In no city," writes the late Rabbi D. I. Freedman of Perth, "have the Jews borne a more praiseworthy part in the development of commerce and trade, in the growth of institutions, and in the administration of public affairs than in Sydney."

But our forbears in this city were also a blessing to their own brethren, in that they loyally carried with them into their new abodes the torch of their undying Faith. Many of the early Jewish settlers were imbued with the spirit of traditional Judaism of the old world. In their new home, so remote from the centre of Jewish learning and life, they did not submerge their religious identity in the melting pot of the new colony. On the contrary, they harmonised outstanding service to their country with fearless devotion to their religious institutions—a feature which since those early days has remained so characteristic of Australian Jewry.

The early Jewish colonists may not have been prompted in their search of a new land by homelessness or persecution, yet we may to-day perceive in their migration just as much a part of the Providential pattern of Israel's scatteredness as in the more recent immigration. Israel

wanders in the vanguard of civilisation. He has been a people on the move. A remarkable new Jewish life has arisen in the New World in recent decades. New communities have sprung up in places where no Jew had ever set foot before. Whilst Jewry is being destroyed in one part of the globe, it strikes roots in another. For a hundred years it has been the general tendency to leave those parts of the Old World which are unfriendly and to follow the Sun of Freedom and Tolerance into the new continents. But every new centre that springs up means a new test to Israel. Will he consciously and proudly keep aloft his spiritual heritage and identify himself with all that is Jewish, or will he submerge his Jewish identity and even his faith in the rush for a new prosperity or in the urge for a misconceived emancipation? The new home should not only be a haven of refuge to the Jewish body; the Jew must salvage and take with him to his new home as much as possible of the religious and the spiritual treasures of Judaism. Never were there so many homeless in Israel. Never was the need as great as to-day for the founding in the new safe islands of Liberty and Justice of centres of Jewish religious life to nourish within us those sublime ideals of our faith which alone can produce the "Well of Salvation" for which we long.

"BETH YISROEL," the name of our Synagogue, invites us to cast our eyes beyond the horizon of our community towards the body general of the Jewish people. We can as yet see no end to Jewish wandering. Page upon page is being added to the Travel Book of Jewry, the last line of which will be written only when Israel has been restored to his land, or when the light of "*the knowledge of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.*"

Our responsibility, in the meantime, is indeed great; let us not fall short of the opportunities which history has placed in our way. With Jacob, it was the vision of the nearness of God that instilled courage and hope into his faint heart at a moment of grave despondency. In service to God he gave expression to his thankfulness and to his regained confidence. The Divine Assurance contained in Jacob's vision still holds good—"God is near to all who call upon Him." Let us, too, find fortitude and hope at this hour of peril in the nearness of God and in His service,

The Service of Consecration of the Foundation Stone of the York Street Synagogue.

Since the delivery of the address of Rabbi Dr. I. Porush, Mr. Justice J. A. Ferguson, of the Industrial Commission of New South Wales, has drawn our attention to the existence in his large collection of books and pamphlets relating to Australian history of a copy of the Order of this Service, which he has very kindly permitted to be reproduced. It is the only copy known to exist. From the manuscript annotations on this copy, it is clear that it was the one actually used at the ceremony by the Secretary to the Building Committee, Mr. George Moss. The signature of Mr. Moss in English and in Hebrew characters appearing on the copy in the possession of Mr. Justice Ferguson has been compared with his signature in English and in Hebrew characters on the certificate of marriage referred to on page 243 of this number. The signatures are of the same writer.

The Prayer for the Queen and the Royal Family appeared in a Sydney newspaper under the following caption :—

The following is a form of prayer and thanksgiving of the Jews, which was on Saturday last used at the different Synagogues throughout Great Britain in the Hebrew Language on the accouchement of Her Majesty the Queen and the happy birth of a Prince Royal.

Mr. Moss had cut out the newspaper extract and gummed it in his bound Order of Service. Included also is another newspaper cutting from *The Australian* of 21st April, 1842, which here follows the Prayer for the Queen and the Royal Family.—[EDITOR'S NOTE.]

ORDER OF THE SERVICE
For The
LAYING
Of The
FOUNDATION STONE
Of
THE SYDNEY SYNAGOGUE,
On
Tuesday, the 19th April, A.M. 5602.

(MINCHA.) Afternoon Service, at Two o'Clock, P.M.
(Ashri.) Psalm CXIV.

SCRIPTURE LESSON.

The Eighteen Blessings, (Shemmonah Esra.)
The Song of Degrees to David, Psalm CXXII.
The Song of Degrees to Solomon, Psalm CXXVII.
Prayer for the Queen and Royal Family.
The Thirtieth Psalm.
The Prayer of Unity (Olynoo).

Conclusion.

(Koddish.) Ejaculatory Praise to God.

ON THE GROUND.

To be read in Hebrew and English.

Solomon's Dedication to the Temple.—1 Kings ch. 8 v. 22 to 61 inclusive.

The Tablet, with inscription, to be read by the President.

Psalms 122 and 127, to be repeated.

Conclusion.

The Prayer of Unity and the Ejaculatory Praise.

O Lord God, King of kings, and Lord of lords, whose dominion is everlasting, in Thy great goodness dost Thou bestow Thy kindness on all the inhabitants of the universe; through Thee kings reign and princes administer justice; on them hast Thou placed the kingly diadem. With song of thanksgiving do we approach Thee, and with praise and blessings for Thy favour shown to us, that Thou hast vouchsafed to visit our Sovereign Lady the Queen Victoria with mercy and salvation. Thou givest to the weary strength and to the feeble power. In her travail Thy help was nigh. Thou didst release her in safety from her suffering, and hast granted her a son. O Lord, bestow on him length of days in health and prosperity, and may his name be praised and extolled; and as Thou pourest water upon the thirsty soil and floods upon the dry ground, so abundantly grant to him the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might. Thou, O Lord, be with him for ever. Amen.

Most High King, whose eyes are upon all created beings, as Thou hast in Thy goodness given the kingly crown to our gracious Queen Victoria, so continue to bestow upon her Thy favour to strengthen her, and may her throne be established in mercy and in kindness; may her days be prolonged and her reign be continued in happiness; may the sceptre not depart from her posterity; and shield her and her offspring, and be to them a guard from all evil; may peace reign in their habitations and tranquillity in their dwellings, and may the bounty of the Lord be on them. Amen.

Let Thy blessing attend his Royal Highness Prince Albert, the illustrious consort of our most gracious Queen; may he live to behold his descendants of the third and fourth generation flourishing and populous in the fulness of Thy bounty. Amen.

The members of the Hebrew body laid the foundation stone of a Synagogue on Tuesday afternoon last, on the plot of ground they recently purchased in York Street. Nearly all the members of their faith were present on the occasion. The service, which was selected from Holy Writ, was read in an impressive manner in the Hebrew and English languages. The plate which was deposited in the stone contained the following inscription:—

"To commemorate the laying of the Foundation Stone of the Sydney Synagogue, in the presence of the Hebrew Body of New South Wales, on Tuesday, 19th day of April, a.m. 5602, in the 5th year of the Reign of our Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, and in the fifth year of the administration of the Government of this Colony by Sir George Gipps."

To which was added, the names of the various persons belonging to their Committees, &c. Mr. Hume is the gentleman engaged as the architect and superintendent of the work, and when completed it will be a neat and commodious building. In the evening about sixty of the subscribers to this place of worship sat down to a sumptuous dinner at the "Albion Tavern." After the removal of the cloth, the usual loyal and local toasts were drunk, as also some appropriate ones relative to the circumstances of the day.

—FROM A CORRESPONDENT.

The Voice of Jacob.

First Australian Jewish Newspaper.

The foundation of the York Street (Sydney) Synagogue caused a quickening of Jewish consciousness throughout New South Wales, which then included the Port Phillip district, now known as Victoria. The movement had a noticeable effect in the country towns in the matter of the observance of the Sabbath. In Sydney, under the editorship of Mr. George Moss, there appeared a local edition of *The Voice of Jacob*, an English periodical founded in 1841. The extract following is from the issue of May 27th, 1842. A copy of this number, and of the only other two numbers published, are included in the library of our late President.—[EDITOR'S NOTE.]

We perceive that two notices relative to the affairs of the members of the Hebrew Persuasion in Sydney, appear in the *London Periodical* from which we have made copious extracts. We now, therefore, republish for the information of our co-religionists in the Mother Country, the extract from the general Census, taken by order