

PHILANTHROPY

Harry Atlas

Philanthropy (charity) is usually translated by the Hebrew *Tzedakah*. It is limited to mean the giving of alms to the poor. It is a sacred duty for every Jew to provide *Tzedakah*. For all other acts of benevolence or kindness the phrase *Gemilut Hesed* is used. The distinction between the two is defined by the following passage:-

In three respects is *Gemilut Hassadim* superior to *Tzedakah*. *Tzedakah* can only be performed with one's material possessions, *Gemilut Hassadim* both in kind and in service. *Tzedakah* can only be given to the poor, *Gemilut Hassadim* to both rich and poor. *Tzedakah* can only be performed for the living. *Gemilut Hassadim* for both the living and the dead.

The rabbis have laid the greatest stress on the spirit in which charity is given. Under no circumstances was the recipient to be shamed. In the highest forms of *Tzedakah* the donor and recipient are ignorant of each other's identity.

For thousands of years Jewry has been steeped in these doctrines of philanthropy.

One hundred years ago a tiny isolated group of Jews gathered to form the Perth Hebrew Congregation. The duty of *Tzedakah* and *Gemilut Hesed* would prove to be an essential bond for their survival.

One hundred years of philanthropy has seen the Perth Hebrew Congregation exhibiting the finest traditions of *Gemilut Hesed* or charity in its finest form. The organisations and groups that embraced these traditions were as diverse as the congregation they served.

The earliest of these groups were mainly English speaking. They had migrated from other parts of Australia, from England, or were east European Jews who had migrated after a stay in England. Later migrants referred to these early pioneers as *Anglos*.

The 1890s was a time of burgeoning growth. The discovery of gold brought newcomers to the colony. Jewish numbers had increased from 129 in 1891 to 1259 in 1901. This tenfold increase was never to be repeated. Migrant groups who came

to the colony from eastern Europe were easily identified by their use of Yiddish which was the vernacular they used in everyday life. Some of these migrants were extremely poor, and yet no philanthropic organisation existed to help them. Tragically, the extreme poverty of some families was not recognised in time to save them. Other eastern European migrants were more fortunate. They had come via English speaking environments; via England or the eastern states of Australia. Many were fortunate enough to join relatives in the colony.

Newcomers who had failed to gain entry to America were attracted by the opportunities offered by the British colonies and the news of the discovery of gold in Australia. Many migrated from Palestine after finding conditions there extremely difficult and many of these Yiddish speaking migrants had serious problems in settlement. The Palestinians were particularly impoverished. They had few skills or money and insisted on maintaining the Shabbat without resorting to work. They turned to hawking, marine collecting and bag dealing. These tiny enterprises, however modest, required some capital which few of them possessed.

The arrival of Reverend D.I. Freedman in 1897 was to mark a watershed in the religious and philanthropic life of the community.

In October 1897 he encouraged the formation of the Perth Jewish Ladies Benevolent Society to relieve cases of distress and to perform women's *tahara*, the preparation of the dead person for burial. This was Gemilut Hesed at its highest. On Reverend Freedman's initiative the Perth Philanthropic Society was established in 1898 to distribute charity within the community.

The Philanthropic Society continued to monitor needs and dispensed small grants and interest free loans to families in need. At Pesach it issued matzah to indigent families and when necessary to the inmates at Fremantle Jail. The Ladies Benevolent Society assisted with help for Jewish widows and children.



Phineas Seeligson



Godel Korsunski

The early work of Reverend Freedman had encouraged a strong sense of duty in the fledgling community. The Ladies Benevolent Society extended its welfare work to the outside community. The Jewish Girls' Guild formed in 1906 helped distressed women and children in the general community and performed voluntary duties in hospitals. The Perth Hebrew Congregation regularly identified with appeals for hospitals and the Home of Peace.

Its non exclusiveness was confirmed by the Western Australian historian J.S. Battye who commented, "the members of this small community of Jews are particularly prominent in the various charitable and philanthropic movements".

The community's sense of duty did not rest with its responsibilities to charities at home. Following the notorious *Kishinev* pogrom in 1903 in Russia, a mass rally was held and raised £427 for Russian Jewish relief.

During the five year period preceding the First World War, migrants who were referred to as "Yiddishers" outnumbered the English speaking Jews who were attracted to the State.

The year 1909 saw the incorporation of the Perth Jewish Association by the many Yiddishers who decided that they needed a shule that reflected the orthodoxy that they knew and could understand. They resented the Anglos attitude towards them. Much more serious was the resentment many of the Palestinians felt towards the Hebrew Philanthropic Society. It had a long history of assisting new arrivals with grants and loans. The needs of the new arrivals perfectly fitted the reason for the society's existence. Many migrants from Palestine, particularly a group from Safed, were rebuffed when they asked for free loan assistance to establish their hawking and marine collecting enterprises. The antipathy between the Perth Hebrew Congregation's Philanthropic Society and the Safed Jews, who were establishing separate *Minyanim* became a source of serious grievance. It was alleged that the society was overbearing in its attitude to the new foreign born migrants.

With considerable faith and few resources the newcomers established a Gemilut Hesed, calling it the Perth Jewish Free Loan Society. Funds were raised by membership and in its formative years it was closely associated with the leaders and membership of "the little shule". This was to continue into the early 1920s when increasing prosperity led to many members deserting the Perth Jewish Association and becoming members of the Perth Hebrew Congregation. The Free Loan Society, despite periods of instability, was to become a strong communal philanthropic organisation with leadership from both congregations. The difficulties of the Depression saw both the Hebrew Philanthropic and the Free Loan Societies working cooperatively during those dismal years.

Following the declaration of war in 1914, the Ladies Benevolent Society and the Jewish Girls' Guild concentrated on work for the Red Cross. Both organisations spearheaded appeals for comforts for the men overseas. The Perth Hebrew Congregation was deeply involved in the campaign. The outstanding contributions made by Western Australian Jewry during the war years earned fulsome praise

in the *West Australian* newspaper. Many articles expressed praise for the war effort of the Western Australian Jewish Community and Rabbi D.I. Freedman's outstanding leadership.

The women's organisations of the Perth Hebrew Congregation had a strong Anglo leadership. The Ladies Benevolent Society was led by Mrs Joseph Sharp, Mrs Gustus Luber and Mrs Harry Cohen. The Jewish Girls' Guild was now deeply involved in philanthropy within and outside the community. The establishment of a Jewish Women's League, initially by Rosetta Luber and carried forward by Fanny Breckler, had as its aim the sponsoring of welfare projects for women and children in Palestine. In the late 1920s, following a visit by Dr Fanny Reading of Sydney, the league became the Council of Jewish Women.

In 1926 the Immigration Welfare Society was formed and welcomed immigrants who had escaped from czarist Russia, on their arrival in Fremantle. It also helped to find employment for those settling in the State.

The great Depression was a national disaster that affected the whole community. With so many members experiencing serious financial problems, charitable and relief work became the major activity. The number of applications for interest free loans were at record levels. Both the Philanthropic Society and the Free Loan Society were forced to reduce the amount they could lend to any one borrower.

The Ladies Benevolent Society made weekly grants of money and food to destitute families. Rosetta Luber, Louise Casper and Fanny Silbert were leading figures in providing desperately needed aid. When welfare agencies found it difficult to meet the demands on them, generous individual donations enabled the volume of calls for assistance to be met.

Under Fanny Breckler the National Council functioned as the premier women's group, assuming large philanthropic responsibility. Fanny Breckler not only supported all charitable endeavours, but privately helped many families in difficult circumstances on a scale which made her virtually a welfare agency in her own right. In this work she was assisted by her daughter Vera Rosenwax.

When Phineas Seeligson died in 1935 he bequeathed his fortune to the congregation. His bequest transformed the basis of charitable work within the community. His assets were to be administered by the Seeligson Trust, composed of the chief minister and the three trustees of the Perth Hebrew Congregation plus three coopted members. Annual grants were to be made to the Perth Hebrew Congregation and the Perth Hebrew School. An important and far reaching direction of the will empowered the trustees with the discretion to assist deserving members of the community to enable them to pursue studies at a tertiary institution. From 1936 onward, the Seeligson Trust made loans and grants directly to individuals as well as subsidising the charitable bodies such as the Ladies Benevolent Society and National Council of Jewish Women.

Seeligson's generosity introduced an unobtrusive but powerful agency within the structure of the community. The trustees sought and obtained permission to widen the scope of the Seeligson Trust. The origins and support for the Seeligson

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Minutes of a Meeting of the Trustees
of the Will of the late Phineas Seeligson, held at the
residence of Sir Chas Nathan on Tuesday 13th August 1935.
Present, Sir C.S.Nathan, Mr M.Breckler, Mr J.Sharp and
Rabbi D.I.Freedman.

Mr M. Breckler was elected Chairman
of the Trustees.

Mr Henry Casper was appointed
Secretary, pro tem, for a period of three months or
until Probate of the Will has been granted, at a
remuneration to be agreed upon.

The Chairman and Secretary were
authorised to see Sir Walter James immediately and
authorise him to take the necessary steps to have
the Will proved.

D.I. Freedman
M. Breckler
J. Sharp
C.S. Nathan

Kindergarten, Carmel School, Jewish Centre, Aged Home and other selected communal projects owe much of their success to Seeligson's munificence.

In 1936 the Jewish community responded to a call for help in the emigration of Jews from prewar Europe. As the prewar situation in Europe worsened, calls were made to the Commonwealth government to relax its restriction on Jewish immigration to Australia. From a few hundred in 1937, several thousands came to Australia in 1939. In June 1937, following the arrival of the first escapees from Nazism, the Perth branch of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society was formed with Rabbi Freedman as its leader. Ill health forced him to retire. His place was taken by Mayer Breckler, the president of the Perth Hebrew Congregation, who was joined by fellow board members and well known communal workers. Nate Zusman was appointed the full-time organising officer. A vacant house next to the Brisbane Street Shule became the headquarters and reception centre. Refugees brought out by Jewish agencies as well as independent immigrants attended English classes, received counselling and an advisory service was also available. Financial help, accommodation and the settling of new arrivals was well organised.

The growing numbers of refugees in 1938 and 1939 were assisted by the Welfare Society. Employment was discreetly handled by the placement of newcomers with Jewish employers.

During the period 1936-39 Australia absorbed 7000 Jewish refugees, Perth less than two hundred. Unfortunately new arrivals without family connections were encouraged to travel to Melbourne and Sydney where the absorption of Jewish migrants was better organised despite the fact that the Perth community needed the injection of these desirable immigrants.

The outbreak of World War II, with the added horrors of the Holocaust, was to create new challenges. Many volunteered for overseas service. A Jewish Women's Red Cross and sections of the Camp Comfort Fund were organised.

The arrival of Jews amongst the displaced persons who were admitted to Australia, presented new pressure. The Federation of Australian Jewish Welfare Societies sponsored 15 000 Jews to arrive between 1946 and 1953. An additional 3 000 arrived following the Hungarian uprising in 1956.

In May 1947 the Welfare Society was revived and strengthened with the incorporation of the Overseas Jewish Relief Fund. The leadership of the Welfare Society rested with members of the Perth Hebrew Congregation Board. Their policy was only to assist those migrants who had relatives in the State or were prepared to spend two years outside the metropolitan area.



Fanny Breckler

Fremantle, the first port of call for migrant ships, became a centre of communal interest. The Welfare Society accepted the responsibility of meeting vessels and greeting Jewish immigrants to Australia. The task was undertaken by a band of workers led by Fremantle identity Issy Orloff. Kosher food, clothing, toys and medical supplies were distributed to the newcomers on board.

Sydney Einfeld, president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and president of the Australian Welfare Society, visited Perth to encourage the absorption of several families. Meagre attempts at resettlement in Perth failed.

The 1954 Commonwealth Census revealed the discrepancy between Western Australia's Jewish intake compared with all other Jewish communities in Australia. Between 1946 and 1953 Western Australia had absorbed 130 Jewish refugees compared with the 15 000 Australian intake.

Rabbi Rubin-Zacks, in a public meeting of the Welfare Society, described Perth's record as a "disastrous failure" because Perth had lost two vital opportunities to help secure the community's future.

In 1974 the Hebrew Philanthropic Society joined the Welfare Society under Roy Shilkin's chairmanship. The Ladies Benevolent Society disbanded in 1985 and divided its assets between the Aged Home and the Welfare Society.

Of the welfare organisations that predated the Seeligson Trust only the Free Loan Society endured. The devotion of Cyril Pearlman, its treasurer, has ensured its survival.

Godel Korsunski, a successful businessman and lifelong Zionist died in 1972 leaving bequests of his large fortune to various funds and institutions in Israel. He willed the remaining portion of his estate to the Godel Korsunski Trust to be administered on behalf of the G. Korsunski Carmel School. Parents in need can apply for partial or total remission of fees which can then be met by the Korsunski or Seeligson Trusts.

The mid 1970s and 1980s were the period in which positive efforts were made to encourage migration. The Western Australian Board of Deputies established an Immigration Committee headed by Keith Shilkin.

Advertisements were placed in the Jewish press in South Africa and England, encouraging potential migrants to THINK PERTH. The Welfare Society concentrated on welcoming and assisting families to become established. It acquired a three bedroom unit named Shalom House to provide temporary accommodation for the new arrivals. The migrant groups from Britain, Scotland, South Africa and Russia caused dramatic changes in the communal mix of Perth Jewry.

A preponderance of married couples with young families, particularly from South Africa, provided the community's religious and educational institutions with hope for the future. The philanthropic needs of the community continue to be served by institutions who jealously guard the sacred duty of Tzedakah and Gemilut Hesed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The data for this paper has been the definitive work of the Jews of Western Australia, *Hebrew, Israelite, Jew* by Dr David Mossenson.

The minutes of the Phineas Seeligson Trust as well as minutes of the Australian Welfare Society proved valuable.

References to the early editions of *The Westralian Judean* were useful.



The New Synagogue.