

ISAACS AND MONASH: THE JEWISH CONNECTION

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In 1930, the Prime Minister of Australia, James Scullin, was asked by the British Government for a view as to a new Governor-General of Australia to succeed Lord Stonehaven. Two names were put forward: Sir Isaac Isaacs and Sir John Monash. Both were Australians; both were Jews. It was the greatest period of Jewish acceptability and prestige in Australian history, and these two leading Jewish citizens had helped to make it so – to the extent that if someone made an anti-Semitic remark, others would be likely to say, “But look at Monash” or (not so frequently) “Look at Isaacs”.

Monash and Isaacs had both reached a pinnacle of fame in professional and public life alike. This aspect of their careers has been adequately covered in Zelman Cowen’s biography of Isaacs¹ and Geoffrey Serle’s of Monash². This present paper, therefore, focuses on a different dimension – the Jewish connection. In each case we shall delve into their Jewish background, associations, involvements and views, and ask ourselves whether, and to what extent, the Jewish connection may be said to have had an influence on the development of their public lives. It would also have been interesting and possibly revealing to have been able to ask whether Monash and Isaacs exchanged views on Jewish matters and how they related to each other in the Jewish milieu of the time – but the fact is that, strangely, they hardly knew each other, their paths rarely crossed, and when Isaacs gave the Monash Oration in Melbourne in 1937 there is no indication that he was speaking about someone with whom he had any particular links of friendship.

ISAACS

Isaacs’ father was Alfred Isaacs, a tailor from Mlava, south-west of Warsaw. Alfred was not well educated, nor does he appear to have had much Jewish knowledge or been a particularly observant of Judaism, despite the popular view that every Jew from Eastern Europe was *froom* (religiously observant). He made his way across Europe to London, there marrying in 1849 Rebecca Abrahams, a widely-read, determined, ambitious young lady whose religious spirit was greater than his, though she too does not seem to have been very orthodox in her observance. In

1851, news of gold discoveries in Australia aroused their interest, and in 1854 they arrived in Melbourne after a three-month voyage. They settled in a shop and cottage in Elizabeth Street, near Flinders Street, where on 6 August, 1855, Isaac Alfred Isaacs was born. Several times they moved house during his childhood. At times they lived near the Eastern Market and near Chinatown, where, inevitably, their son heard a whole babble of languages in the streets, and this may well have encouraged his natural talent as a linguist (in later life he was in the habit of seeking out speakers of German, Russian, Italian, Chinese and other tongues in order to converse with them in their own languages). The amount of Hebrew he learnt as a child we do not know, but as a very old man, at the very period at which he was embroiled in bitter antagonism to political Zionism, he was buying modern Hebrew phrase-books and teaching himself to speak the reborn language of the Jewish settlers in *Eretz Yisrael*.

From Melbourne the family moved – partly because business was poor, and partly due to depression caused by the death of another child – to the north-east of Victoria, near the New South Wales border. They settled in 1859 in Yackandandah³, where we know there to have been, in 1861, fifteen Jews which must have included the Isaacs; then, in 1867, they moved to Beechworth for the sake of Isaac's education. In 1957 there had been a sizeable community of 100 Jews in the town, and *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services had taken place with the use of a *Sefer Torah* and *Shofar* from the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation. By 1861, however, the number of Jews was down to about 40, and we are not certain whether the congregation continued in existence, or whether the Isaacs family had much to do with their Jewish fellow citizens, or even whether Isaac had a Barmitzvah. We do know that, especially from his mother, he gained an interest in religion in the widest sense. He also became well acquainted with the Bible (probably only from the English translation) and with *Pirkei Avot* (again, probably in translation); in their letters to each other Isaacs and his mother often refer to religious concepts and discuss biblical characters and books on religion. But never do you get the impression that conventional religious observance matters greatly to either of them or to the family. (The son's filial bond with his mother was remarkable, and even when he was busiest in public life he would speak to her on the telephone every day at 7 p.m.)

He became a pupil teacher and then an assistant teacher, and was offered a post at the Melbourne Hebrew School, but this he declined. After law studies in Melbourne he entered the legal profession and eventually embarked upon a political career. At this period of his life, even when he became Attorney-General of Victoria, he allowed himself to become involved in the Jewish community life of Melbourne. In the

1880s he was an examiner in secular subjects at the Melbourne Hebrew School, and by the end of the decade he was honorary secretary of the Jewish Young Men's Russian Relief Fund, even persuading the Education Minister to allow voluntary subscriptions to the cause to be taken up in Victorian state schools.

As Attorney-General he chaired, in the mid-1890s, the foundation meeting of the United Jewish Education Board, and he was a member of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation. He attended an annual general meeting of the Synagogue and supported the introduction of an organ into Sabbath and festival worship, against the wishes of the minister, Dr Joseph Abrahams; on another occasion he voiced his objections to the congregation allowing "illegal games of chance" at a bazaar.

His communal associations were severed rather abruptly, however, partly because he was too busy with his public responsibilities, and partly, it appears, because strong-willed, forthright Phillip Blashki insulted him by saying that Isaacs could have taken more interest in his role of president of the Jewish Education Board. Isaacs resigned the presidency in anger – an action which seems in character for a man whom a friend has described as "a good hater" – and thereafter he never again had any close association with a congregation, a Jewish organisation, or the Jewish community as a whole. Years later, at the height of his outspoken anti-Zionism, it was said of Isaacs by Dr Aaron Patkin that "never before has this distinguished man of public service and duty displayed any active interest in Jewish affairs, communal or national". The comment was not entirely correct, but Patkin was not to know of events so much earlier in Isaacs' Victorian period.

Isaacs did take up a position on public issues of interest to the Jewish community. He ruled that if two Jews married in a church or registry office it was a valid marriage according to the laws of the colony. He supported a referendum on the reintroduction of religion into state education, though in the end the Legislative Assembly decided not to proceed with amending the Education Act. At times the Victorian parliament heard anti-Semitic remarks addressed to Isaacs and he would reply angrily. (Zelman Cowen records that there were occasions when Isaacs was in federal parliament when there was good humour about such exchanges; once Sir George Reid remarked, "The Right Honourable minister looks as if he would like to eat me", to which Isaacs retorted, "The Right Honourable member has forgotten my religion!")

But Isaacs – uninterested in Jewish observance – did not share the problem of a South Australian delegate to the Federal Convention, Vabian Solomon, who requested that meetings not take place on Saturdays because he had to attend synagogue. Isaacs never voluntarily went to a synagogue service.

Nor, during the four eventful decades of public life that followed, in politics, the judiciary and the vice-regal office, did he take any particular interest in Jewish affairs or issues, other than in a detached, intellectual fashion. He would give occasional addresses to or make official appearances at Jewish gatherings, but mostly because this was a responsibility of public office. He did not have many Jewish friends. His wife Deborah (Daisy), whom he married in 1888, was the daughter of Isaac Jacobs of Middle Park, a staunch advocate of reform of the Jewish prayer-book and liturgy (Rabbi Danglow used to remark that when he arrived in St Kilda, Isaac Jacobs tried to pull him towards reform and Phillip Blashki back towards orthodoxy). Isaac and Daisy had two daughters, Marjorie and Nancy, but as far as is known they gave them no Jewish education. The family did not keep even *Pesach* or *Yom Kippur*. Isaacs did tell a friend that he did not eat pork, but because to him it was the greatest insult to give a Jew pork. His grandson – his only grandchild – cannot remember Isaacs attending his Barmitzvah.⁴ Isaacs' son-in-law, David Cohen, attended the Great Synagogue every *Shabbat*, but an hour or so later, when Sir Isaac and Lady Isaacs came to lunch at the Cohens, Isaacs showed no interest in what might have happened in the synagogue or in Rabbi Cohen's sermon. For many years Isaacs was friendly with Rabbi Danglow, but the Rabbi took him as he was and enjoyed their intellectual exchanges whilst not attempting to interest Isaacs in Jewish worship or observance.

Yet Isaacs' interest in Judaism, the Bible and religion generally – on a scholarly, academic level – remained intense. With both Danglow and (possibly) Rabbi Brodie, and certainly with a number of Christian clergy, he had many discussions and exchanges of letters on biblical and theological subjects, especially the biblical story of Jacob and the problem of the Book of Job. He acquired many books on theology, read them and put annotations in the margins, and underlined passages, often with a thick red pencil. After his retirement he spent massive amounts of time reading and writing, often on Jewish themes. His hobby was reading detective stories, which engaged his sharp legal mind, and every week he would go into town and buy a fresh supply. His main occupation was working in the Victorian Public Library, where he studied the Bible in many languages, read extensively about the period of Jewish history from the Babylonian exile to the Maccabees, and pursued theological investigations into themes such as the problem of evil. He wrote prolifically, often sending reams every week to the Jewish papers (especially the *Hebrew Standard* and the anti-Zionist *Australian Jewish Outlook*). Some of his subjects were academic, such as the Book of Job; some topical, such as peace and the fatherhood of God; many were polemical, notably Zionism, on which he wrote not only to the Jewish but to the

daily press. Rabbi Danglow sometimes acted as his chauffeur when he had a letter or article to take into one of the papers.

If Isaacs' articles on the problem of evil and the Book of Job are any indication, he was not a significant theological scholar. Three issues of the *Hebrew Standard* in 1942 devote page after page to his exposition of the subject, at the same time also publishing long letters from his pen on Zionism, the World Jewish Congress and other subjects. Verbosity does not necessarily indicate profundity. He states the problem, eclectically quotes a few suggested explanations, analyses the Book of Job, and quotes those scholars whose interpretations he deems sufficient. There is hardly any originality in what he writes, and he is cavalier and dogmatic in his choice of quotations from the works of others.

In particular, he sweepingly dismisses Jewish literature, with its long history of grappling with issues of life and death, as unequipped to give any direction on the subject. All he knows or is prepared to mention of the Jewish sources are two pages in Schechter's *Rabbinic Theology* and a paragraph in Hertz's *Book of Jewish Thoughts*. Of the first he says, "I pass them by for I cannot accept them as convincing the mind that measures them by the standards of reason or by our sense of . . . Mercy and Justice". His comment on the second extract is, "Eloquent and within limits inspiring as it is, it falls short of meeting the direct question".

By way of contrast, he "humbly and gratefully" acknowledges "distinguished Christian Scholars who have devoted much learning and ability to an extended study . . ." and in the end ignores (or is unaware of) Jewish exegesis in favour of the more characteristically Christian view that in Job's words, "Now mine eye seeth Thee", the problem disappears because Job has had a mystical religious experience and his faith is restored.

Danglow said in a letter addressed to Isaacs on his 91st birthday in 1946,

Many of your co-religionists, including, of course, myself, my wife and family, . . . are thankfully aware of the manifold and especially valuable services you have rendered Australian Jewry, particularly during the recent troubled years in the annals of our people.

Your clear foresight, sound judgment, able pen and fearless championship of the honour and integrity of the Jewish name, have laid the Jews of the Commonwealth under a lasting debt of gratitude to you . . .

Beautiful sentiments, but most of the Jewish community would have voiced a far less laudatory view of Isaacs' contribution to the history of

Australian Jewry. They would have expected the most famous living Australian Jew to understand the agonies and aspirations of his fellow Jews, and to allow his prestige and pen to advance the Jewish cause as most Jews understood it. But Isaacs allowed himself at times to prefer Hitler's rabid rantings to the agonised cry of his persecuted Jewish brethren. In 1943 he wrote, "When I read the truly pestilent (Zionist) doctrines preached to our Jewish youth... I see considerable force in what (Hitler) says about the political Zionists".⁵ Yet there were times when Isaacs seemed to understand what was happening and what Jews felt about it. He allowed his name to be used to help the newly formed Australian Jewish Welfare Society as patron, but it has been suggested that his agreement owed something to the fact that the request came from members of the Jewish gentry, some of whom were his relatives by marriage. He wrote a moving centenary message to the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation in 1941, referring to "this country of human freedom and God-fearing people, where happily the appalling persecution and oppression and the unparalleled sufferings of Jews in some other countries are both nonexistent and deplored", but it is possible that he agreed to prepare this message because the publication in which it was to appear had been largely prepared by his friend, A. Newton Super.

Whether he was fully aware of what was happening in the Holocaust and how desperately the Jewish victims of Hitler needed their plight to be understood and alleviated, is a matter of some doubt. Already, in 1938, he opposed Jewish refugee migration to Australia, saying,

It is no part of the objects or purposes of the Jewish Welfare Society to procure the immigration of these unfortunates into Australia, or to suggest we support any mass immigration or group settlement of aliens for whatsoever cause they may come.

He opposed the Kimberleys scheme as "constitutionally and socially impossible of acceptance in Australia". True, the Jewish community itself was divided on the desirability of the proposed settlement in the Kimberleys, but when he expressed antagonism to normal refugee migration, fellow Jews wondered where he wished the refugees to go. He did, after the war, add his voice to those that defended the postwar refugee arrivals, but he was criticised for not speaking out strongly and clearly enough on the subject.

The major controversy in which he was at odds with fellow Australian Jews was of course on the question of political Zionism. The controversy has been written up in detail by several writers, notably Zelman Cowen⁶, Godfrey Lee⁷ and Leonie Star in her biography of Julius Stone⁸, who was Isaacs' main literary antagonist at this period. For our present purpose, therefore, it does not seem necessary to repeat material which

is readily available elsewhere. But a number of general observations are appropriate.

Though Isaacs had admired the Balfour Declaration, until the late 1930s he showed little interest either way in the Zionist question. His developing opposition to Zionism was not always clear or consistent, but his main concerns appear to have been that a Jewish state would lead to problems with the Arabs, create tensions with Britain and raise problems of Jewish ingratitude and disloyalty, and unduly concentrate the Jews in one place instead of being happy in lands of freedom everywhere.

His detailed arguments, as Julius Stone carefully demonstrated, fell far short of the standards of intellectual honesty, clear analysis, accurate citing of authority, and correct statement of both law and facts which one would expect of an eminent jurist. (Stone thought he had indulged in intellectual trickery).

Isaacs could not be moved from his dogmatism. His family tended to agree with his views but knew that no-one could tell him what to do or get him to tone down his opinions, which were characteristically marked by "appalling certainty, . . . unshakeable conviction of the rightness of his opinion, and the utter and complete inability to see merit in any other view". A few times he discussed his views with Newton Super, who did not agree with him but kept his own counsel because Isaacs was difficult to convince and difficult to argue with.

Isaacs "deliberately used his position", as Zelman Cowen puts it, to give the impression that he had the right to be perceived as a spokesman for the Jewish people, and to harm the efforts of the majority of the Jewish community to find a lasting solution to the problem of a Jewish homeland.

That the community never forgot or forgave became clear early in the 1980s, when immense pressure was exerted on the Great Synagogue, Sydney, to cancel an Isaacs exhibition in the A.M. Rosenblum Jewish Museum. The argument put to the Synagogue by a number of leaders of the community was that Isaacs did not deserve to be honoured by a Jewish organisation. The Synagogue leadership understood the deep and genuine feelings that were expressed, but did not cancel the exhibition.

Despite the deep-seated and long-lasting resentment at Isaacs' stance on Zionism, official Jewish bodies continued to consult him in the last years of his life, especially on ways of handling anti-Semitism. On his death the Executive Council of Australian Jewry issued a tribute, signed by its president, Saul Symonds, which said, "Always a keen and outspoken student of Jewish problems, his experience and counsel were ever at the disposal of those who sought them and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry has on many occasions consulted with him on the urgent problems that confronted it."



Funeral of Sir Isaac Isaacs, Melbourne General Cemetery, Carlton, 13 February 1948. Rabbi Danglow is seen speaking.

Another organisation which he frequently advised was the Melbourne Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism, which was not yet regarded by the communal establishment as a thorn in the flesh of the body politic. Until a few months before his death, when his health became impaired, he paid a weekly visit to the Council's city office, where delicate issues were referred to him and he drafted letters and documents for the Council and lent his name to official approaches designed to check anti-Semitic manifestations. Amongst matters on which he advised was that of group libel legislation. Once again, it was Isaacs responding energetically to anti-Semitism, not only as a Jew but as an Australian who saw that prejudice of this kind threatened the fabric of democratic society.

The fact that Isaacs is not remembered with much affection by Australian Jews, even though his massive contribution to Australian history is everywhere admired, is paralleled by the fact that in his lifetime he was not a popular figure amongst fellow Australians generally. He was seen as cold, intellectual, obstinate and ambitious. Yet,

though he was not a great mixer with people, he could show great personal kindness and concern. When he went into the city every week during the war, he would call in to enquire after the well-being of the wife of a friend who was away on active service. Many people treasured similar occasions of interest in and concern for their welfare.

His critics often referred to what they saw as his unpleasant traits as Jewish. Deakin called him "a short, sparse, dark-skinned Jew . . . dogmatic by disposition, full of legal subtlety and the precision of the rabbinical mind". According to Beatrice Webb, he was "a typical clever young Jew . . . like many clever pushing Israelites he presumes too much on the stupidity of the Gentile".

Did his Jewishness play any part in George V's reluctance to appoint him as Governor-General? The answer is probably no. It was a radical constitutional precedent to appoint what the King called "a local man" as Governor-General of a dominion, and there were grave doubts as to its advisability. It is a tribute to the lack of significant anti-Semitism in Australia that the two Australians considered by Scullin for submission to London were both Jewish.

Did Isaacs' Jewishness directly influence his career? Despite his uninvolvedness in Jewish life and his lack of sympathy with Jewish tradition and Jewish issues, the sharp legal mind, facility with words, ability with languages, and concern for justice and the rule of law which were characteristic of Isaacs, are all often declared to be Jewish traits. There is also the compulsion that the son of poor immigrant parents feels to rise above his difficulties and reach the top. Isaacs' achievement owes something to his Jewish heritage, much to his native ability, and a great deal to the hospitable setting which Australian provided. As Rabbi Brasch has said of Monash in words that could be applied equally to Isaacs, "The fact that this son of immigrant foreigners should reach a position where he would be entrusted with the nation's highest command, speaks volumes for the maturity and democracy of Australia".

MONASH

Compared to Alfred and Rebecca Isaacs, Monash's parents, Louis and Bertha Monash, had significant Jewish lineage, and Monash often expressed his pride in his ancestry. Louis Monash (the name was originally spelt Monasch) was the son of a Prussian Hebrew publisher, the grandson of a rabbi and Talmud scholar, and the brother-in-law of the historian Heinrich Graetz. Bertha, née Manasse, came from a cultured but more assimilated family. Their emigration to Melbourne in 1864 may have been because of the Australian opportunities which other relatives had already discovered, but possibly also to escape their parents' orthodoxy.

John Monash was born in Melbourne on 27 June, 1865 – about ten years after Isaacs – and was brought up speaking German as well as English. In 1874 the family moved to Jerilderie in the Riverina where Louis Monash became a storekeeper, in the tradition of many other Jews in Australian country towns in the nineteenth century. 1877 found John enrolled in Scotch College, Melbourne. The following year he celebrated his Barmitzvah at the East Melbourne Synagogue, where he sang in the choir under Louis Pulver. His Barmitzvah teacher was Rev. Isidore Myers; his Barmitzvah *Siddur* is in the library of Monash University in Melbourne. But by the age of 16 he had turned against Myers and Pulver, and grown away from religion. Later he became interested in the Blashki girls, but their orthodoxy did not appeal to him, and his own unorthodoxy worried them; he explained that he accepted the moral teaching of the Bible, but saw God in nature, rejected traditional concepts of Deity, and thought religious ceremonies were meaningless.

His parents were not active in the Jewish community, and John Monash had no close Jewish friends. In April, 1891, he married Hannah Victoria Moss in a Jewish ceremony, but later refused to attend synagogue for the naming of their daughter. At times he maintained membership of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation but did not attend even on *Yom Kippur*, though he did ask Dr Abrahams to help in his marital problems, and he attended synagogue, to please his family, when his father died.

He took some part in the Jewish Literary Society and contributed to the United Jewish Education Board and other Jewish causes, but as his career developed and he faced personal and professional setbacks he took less and less interest in Jewish affairs. But a turning point came with his wartime military service. His exercise of command – an exceptional achievement for a non-professional soldier with the dual burden of German and Jewish extraction – gave him a sense of fulfilment. (Writing many years later in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, A.J. Hill said that Monash “resembled Napoleon in more ways than one; not the least important was that he was the author of his own legend”.) Lloyd George thought him the most resourceful commander on the Western Front; some, such as Lord Moyne (then Colonel Guinness) who called him a “typical old Jew”, had a less complimentary view. There is a widely held opinion that he was denied the post of head of the entire allied command because he was a Jew, but there is no firm evidence either way. The military historians tend to agree with Liddell Hart, who said Monash “had probably the greatest capacity for command in modern war among all who held command in the last war”. He is certainly the greatest Jewish soldier in Diaspora history.

The war correspondent, C.E.W. Bean, had strongly opposed Monash’s

appointment. Apart from his view that Monash was too much of a scholar to be able to inspire his troops, he asserted, "We do not want Australia represented by men mainly because of their ability, natural and inborn in Jews, to push themselves". Later, in his official history of the war, he recognised that he had misjudged Monash, but there is still the lingering doubt that Monash was too pushy — apparently considered a Jewish trait.⁹

Monash, himself, knew his Jewishness was held against him. He told Maurice Ashkanasy, "Remember you are a Jew and that if you muck it up our people will be blamed". He accorded religious facilities to the Jewish chaplains, including the provision of kosher food for officers and men who wanted it, and promised to attend the field service for *Yom Kippur* in 1918 but in the end was prevented from doing so by his military duties. After the war he was wined and dined in London by the Jewish establishment. They called him "Our Judas Maccabeus". He let his name be associated with the anti-Zionist League of British Jews, but later recognised this was a mistake. There were rumours that he would become Governor-General or military governor of Palestine, but he was not interested; what he really would have liked was to be Governor of Victoria.

Both in London and when he returned to Australia, he appeared on Jewish platforms and became associated with the Jewish community — partly out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*, partly because he had mellowed. He chaired important communal meetings, such as those for Chief Rabbi Hertz and the Zionist emissary, Israel Cohen. He dedicated Jewish war memorials, such as the Maccabean Hall, opened in 1923 in Sydney. Opening the Maccabean Hall, he said of the building, "It has a symbolic purpose, for behind it is the aim of keeping the Jewish people together and perpetuating our faith; it is to prevent the regrettable drift of our people's allegiance from the religion of their fathers". Clearly, as he told Israel Cohen, since his return from the war he was taking an increasing and active interest in Jewish affairs. He agreed to join the board of the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation, though he declined the presidency. Occasionally he went to services, especially on *Yom Kippur*, though he could not easily follow the Hebrew and really preferred a more liberal form of worship.

Serle comments that Monash "was taking his religion with some, perhaps only a little, seriousness . . . He was coming round, if no more, to take some comfort in religious ceremonies which he had hardly ever attended since he was a boy". His sympathy with the emergent liberal Jewish congregation was clear from his reply to an invitation in 1930 to interest himself in their activities; "while I might in my younger days have welcomed and taken up such a modernizing movement with some enthusiasm, I feel that this work is for a younger generation". He

added, in words which indicate sensitivity to the feelings of the Jewish community, "It would be inevitable that any public association of myself with such a movement would be resented by some of the more orthodox members". The Jewish community was proud of him and the Judean League in Melbourne named its Carlton centre Monash House.

Of considerable significance, and in contrast to Isaacs and a number of leading figures in the Jewish establishment, is his willingness to be publicly associated with the Zionist cause. In 1920, he chaired a meeting at which the Zionist emissary, Israel Cohen, was the speaker, and pledged to donate £100 a year (an impressive amount) for five years. After the meeting he told Cohen that though he had not previously identified himself with Zionism he had always been proud that his relative, Heinrich Graetz, had been a keen supporter of the Jewish settlement in Palestine.

The Zionist influences on him included Rabbi Israel Brodie, Dr J. Leon Jona, Colonel Eliezer Margolin (he had publicly defended Margolin against anti-Semitic attacks) and Alec Masel. When the Zionist leadership succeeded in securing his acceptance of the presidency of the newly-formed Zionist Federation in 1927, albeit more as a figurehead than as an active worker, it was a turning-point in Australian Zionism and made the movement *kosher*. Eliahu Honig has written an account of how the movement secured Monash's support. In a skilful appeal to Jewish sentiment and Australian patriotism, Monash addressed a letter to the Jews of Australia, saying, "We who are living in Australia have a double responsibility, both as Jews and citizens, to do our share in rebuilding the land of Israel and reviving the cultural and spiritual centre of Judaism".

The late 1920s saw British policies in Palestine which angered and upset the Jews of the *Yishuv* and the world, especially the infamous Wailing Wall incident on *Yom Kippur*, 1928. On that day British mandatory officials removed a partition which separated male and female worshippers at the Wall, making it impossible for worship to take place. In Australia, Rabbi Cohen of the Great Synagogue gave a sermon entitled "The Law and the Flag", trying to defend the British authorities. Rabbi Brodie showed himself a statesman when, by way of contrast, he said:

Jews trust His Majesty's Government and know that Great Britain has always been the champion of justice. They appreciate Great Britain's friendship and help for the establishment of the Jewish National Home in Palestine, and feel sure that all necessary steps will be taken in order to remedy the deplorable mistake that has been made in Jerusalem.

Monash could have been caught in a position of great embarrassment on this and a number of other occasions when Zionist associations and Empire loyalties appeared to conflict. He greatly impressed every section of the Jewish community when he acted as a restraining influence on both Zionists and non-Zionists with his admission that Jews had a right to be bitter at British policies – to which he added his insistence that world Jewry owed the Empire gratitude, loyalty and allegiance, and said that Jews could and should rely on Britain to carry out its obligations under the Mandate.

It is interesting but perhaps fruitless to speculate about whether Monash, had he lived, would have entered the fray in the late 1930s and 1940s when Isaacs insisted that the Zionists were un-British and worse. But Monash died in 1931 in his 66th year. He never achieved his secret ambition to become a State Governor; by 1930, when he was considered together with Isaacs for the governor-generalship, he was already too unwell to be a serious candidate.

Amongst Australians generally, he was better known and more popular than Isaacs. It was not only that he was known as a man amongst men and was a war hero; he was not so much of a rarefied intellectual, despite his great mental capacities, but a pragmatist and man of action. Colin McInnes said of him that he “made anti-Semitism, as a ‘respectable’ attitude, impossible in Australia”. His national prestige was such that the whole Jewish community benefitted from the admiration in which ex-servicemen and Australians generally had for this Jewish hero. Like clergymen of many denominations, Rabbi Cohen based his memorial tribute to Monash on the verse, “Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?” (II Sam. 3:38).

Monash was not only more popular but more visibly Jewish than Isaacs. In the last years of his life he carried on an extensive correspondence with Jewish writers overseas. Professor A.A. Roback, author of *The Jewish Influence in Modern Thought*, exchanged letters with him in which Monash expressed pride in the Jewish lineage of the family and showed interest in Graetz’ letters to his mother. A warm concern for the Jewish people and especially for European Jewry – whose days, perhaps unknown to him, were numbered – quite clearly emerges from this correspondence. Again one is tempted to speculate whether Monash, if he had lived, could and would have been able to use his position to spearhead the effort to save Jews from the clutches of the Nazis and to alleviate the agony and homelessness of the survivors. Professor Roback wrote just after the Second World War:

It is a comfort to think that . . . [Monash] was one of us, who would have identified himself with his kin in the Polish ghettos whose lives were so wantonly snuffed out. Had Monash lived today, as



Graves of Sir John and Lady Monash, Brighton Cemetery, Melbourne.

he might well have, perhaps the fate of many of those unfortunates might have been different.

Monash is amongst the handful of great Jews who seized the imagination of their people. Sometimes it was not so much because of immense achievement on behalf of the Jewish cause and destiny, but rather that they symbolised pride that a Jew who rose high amongst the gentiles did not forget his origins and his people; bitter experience showed how often the opposite was true, that Jewish identity was sacrificed on the altar of aspiration and advancement.

Hence it is not difficult to understand why a settlement in Israel was named *Kfar Monash*, and the Australian Jewish community created its own memorials to him, over and above the institutions (such as Monash University) named after him by his fellow Australians. Nor is it hard to understand Jewish resentment that Monash's Jewish connection hardly figured in the biographical publication issued in 1961 by the State Electricity Commission of Victoria, and was ignored when the Monash memorial was dedicated in Melbourne near the Shrine of Remembrance in 1950.

Of both Isaacs and Monash it is right to say that their achievement is a tribute to Australia as well as themselves. Neville Wran, then Premier of New South Wales, put it succinctly in 1978 at the Great Synagogue's

centenary dinner at the Sydney Town Hall, when he said, "With the exception of modern Israel itself, only one nation in more than 2000 years has called upon Jews to be head of its armies, head of its judiciary, and twice, head of State: John Monash, Isaac Isaacs, Zelman Cowen. Not since the Diaspora has this happened in any other nation in the world".

NOTES

1. Cowen, Zelman, *Isaac Isaacs*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1967; cf. also Cowen's booklet on Isaacs, 1962 and 1979.
2. Serle, Geoffrey, *John Monash: A Biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982.
3. On Jewish communities in nineteenth century Victoria, see Goldman, L.M., *The Jews In Victoria in the Nineteenth Century*, Melbourne: The Author, 1954 and Rubinstein, Hilary L. *The Jews in Victoria, 1835-1985*, Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1986.
4. Tom Cohen, Isaacs' grandson, was good enough to speak with me in detail concerning his grandfather's views and personality. Mrs Sylvia Super also gave me colourful insights into Isaacs.
5. This incredible statement is quoted by Star, Leonie, *Julius Stone: An Intellectual Life*, 1992, p.191, from the *Bulletin* (which, with *Smith's Weekly* was far from averse to publishing material calculated to distress the Jewish community).
6. Cowen, *op. cit.*, chapter 9.
7. Lee, Godfrey, "The Battle of the Scholars — The Debate Between Sir Isaac Isaacs and Julius Stone over Zionism during World War II", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol 31, no 1, 1985, pp. 128-134.
8. Star, *op. cit.*, chapter 8; cf also W.D. Rubinstein (ed), *Jews in the Sixth Continent*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987, chapters by John S. Levi, Alan D. Crown, Rodney Goultman and W.D. Rubinstein.
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