

AUSTRALIAN SYNAGOGUE NAMES

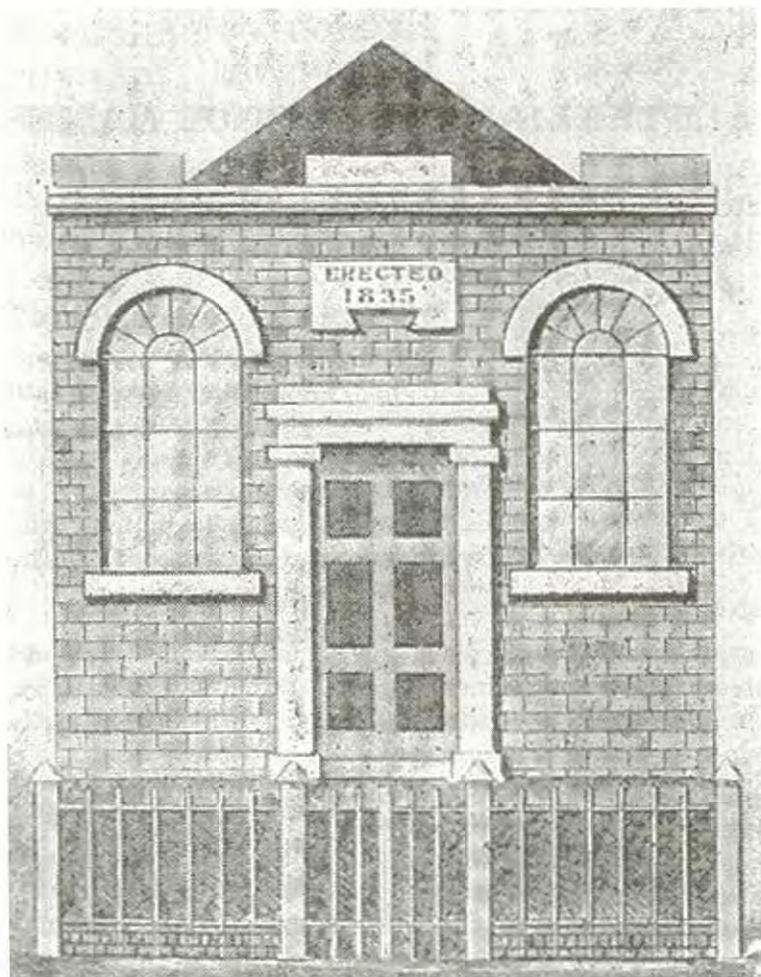
By Rabbi Raymond Apple

Synagogues – their demography, geography, ideology and social history—tell us a great deal about their congregations. Australia is no exception. Even the mere names of Australian synagogues—both in English and in Hebrew – are a fruitful source of history. This paper argues that over and above their value as a historical resource, synagogue names have a history all of their own.

English Names

In the early years of Australian Jewry, each synagogue had both an English and a Hebrew name. Two traditions developed in regard to English names. These traditions were largely geographically based, with one tradition emerging in New South Wales and the other in Victoria and the other Australian states.

In New South Wales, the name 'The ... Synagogue' became the norm. The precedent was London Jewry, from which most congregations in the Empire and Commonwealth took their lead. Hence the names Great Synagogue and Central Synagogue in Sydney reflect 'the English usage' and the formative period of *Minhag Anglia* (that is, 'the English usage'). The original Great Synagogue in the City of London – founded in the early eighteenth century – was the first, the largest and the pre-eminent Ashkenazi synagogue of the Empire. 'Great' signified 'large', but the name carried with it a significant element of self-pride. In Sydney, it appears that the large synagogue in Elizabeth Street created out of the union of the York Street and Macquarie Street Synagogues in the 1870s was called 'Great' for three reasons: its size, deference to London and self-image. There were similar Great Synagogues in a number of other leading cities of the Empire. Not that the communal elders expected to emulate the learning of the *anshei k'nesset hagedolah*, the 'Men of the Great Synagogue (or Great Assembly of Scholars)', referred to in *Mishnah Avot* ('Ethics of the Fathers'). It was not thoughts of learning or piety but of prestige that motivated these nineteenth century worthies.



Macquarie Street Synagogue, formerly Friends' Meeting House

In Sydney, smaller congregations arose from time to time but there was no real challenge to the Great until the rise of the Eastern Suburbs community, which established the Central Synagogue in 1912, adopting a name which also arose out of the London scene where in the mid-nineteenth century the Jews of the West End had finally succeeded in establishing the Central Synagogue in Great Portland Street, though the Great – in the City of London itself – retained its hegemony for a long period. In Sydney the success of the Central led to a two-edged saying: 'The Great isn't central but the Central isn't great'.

Like the Great and the Central, other Sydney congregations also called themselves 'The ... Synagogue', though at times the term 'The

...Hebrew Congregation' was adopted. In some cases there were stages; thus the Northern Sydney Hebrew Congregation, founded in 1940, became the North Shore Synagogue.



These postcards are of shules in
Victoria — clockwise:
Geelong, Bourke Street
(Melbourne), Ballarat, Bendigo

Outside New South Wales, synagogues almost always used the name 'Hebrew Congregation'. Thus, the first three Victorian metropolitan synagogues were the Melbourne, East Melbourne and St. Kilda *Hebrew Congregations*. In other cities this latter terminology was also adopted – thus Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth called themselves Hebrew Congregations, not Synagogues. The word 'Hebrew' was preferred to 'Jewish', again with English antecedents (such as the Birmingham *Hebrew Congregation*), because 'Hebrew' sounded softer, more Biblical and even more respectable in days when 'Jewish' was associated by unfriendly elements with unsavoury traits and habits. 'Hebrew' was used for similar reasons in various other contexts, for example 'Hebrew compartments' at general cemeteries and 'Hebrew chaplains' in the defence force. This usage has now disappeared and the cemeteries have *Jewish* sections and the defence force has *Jewish* chaplains.

The predilection for the word 'Hebrew', though it began in Britain, was, however, never universal even there. Sections of the Anglo-Jewish community openly used the names 'Jews' and 'Jewish', for example the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation, the West London Synagogue of British Jews, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jews' Orphan Asylum and Jews' College.

The English names of Australian synagogues were generally, apart from the Great and the Central in Sydney, defined by geography, for example: Newcastle Hebrew Congregation, South Brisbane Hebrew Congregation and Hobart Hebrew Congregation. Some names were maintained even when the synagogue moved, such as the Blake Street Hebrew Congregation in South Caulfield, Melbourne.

With the English names came Hebrew nomenclature which rarely bore any relationship to the English name: for example East Melbourne was *Mikveh Yisra'el* (in the early days often spelt *Mickva Yisroile*) – the Hope of Israel; St. Kilda was *Ohavei Shalom* – Lovers of Peace. There is a recent tendency to have Hebrew names without any English version at all. Few of the newer synagogues use the archaic phrase 'Hebrew Congregation'.



Interior of the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation

When the Liberal movement began in Australia in the 1930s its places of worship were called Temples, though the Liberal congregation in Melbourne initially called itself the Beth Israel Congregation because it had no permanent house of worship. The decision to re-name the congregation 'Temple Beth Israel' was made in 1937 when land was acquired for a synagogue building. Although continental orthodox synagogues called themselves 'Temple' (for example in Paris and Budapest), the term became especially associated with the new Jewish world of North American Jewry, especially its Reform element. In Australia, the Central European Jews who brought strength to the Liberal movement may have liked the term 'Temple' for nostalgic reasons. There may have been an ideological consideration in that early American and European Reform proclaimed that it did not believe in the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple, and its temples, wherever in the Diaspora they stood, were its sacred edifices. Since those days the World Union for Progressive Judaism has become strongly Zionist (in Australia, the Liberal congregations never had an anti-Zionist period), but in many places the name 'Temple' has been retained out of convention. Nonetheless, 'Temple' is out of fashion in many contemporary Australian Liberal communities. Thus, Temple Emanuel in Sydney is now The Emanuel Synagogue and the Adelaide Liberal Temple is now Beit Knesset Shalom.

Newer orthodox congregations are tending not to have separate English names at all but call themselves merely '*Kehillah*', the Hebrew for 'congregation'. In Sydney the congregation that meets at Masada College is *Kehillat Masada*; the congregation at Moriah College is *Kehillat Moriah*. The Conservative congregation in Melbourne, which has no building of its own, is *Kehillat Nitzan*.

The increasing number of Lubavitch-affiliated centres are known as Chabad Houses (this is an acronym derived from '*Chochmah*', wisdom; '*Binah*', understanding; and '*Da'at*', knowledge). In Sydney, a Bellevue Hill community has called itself 'The *Shtiebell*', a Yiddish word that literally means 'room' but is a customary term for a small, warm place of worship.

There were places where a synagogue commenced as an adjunct of a community centre but became the main facility in the centre with an independent identity and name; examples are the Caulfield and North-Eastern Jewish Centres in Melbourne. From the Caulfield Centre emanated the Caulfield Hebrew Congregation; in Doncaster the synagogue part of the North-Eastern Centre became the Yeshurun Synagogue. Both Caulfield and Yeshurun are orthodox.

A number of other synagogues began as and remain adjuncts of

a wider facility. These include prayer rooms at *yeshivot* in Melbourne and Sydney, and at old age homes in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, a welfare agency in Melbourne, and schools in Melbourne and Sydney.

The strangest name for a synagogue is the nickname 'Katanga', by which the Caulfield *Beth Hamedrash* in Melbourne is known. It began as a breakaway from Mizrachi at the time of an African crisis when Katanga separated from the Congo.

A note is necessary about the actual meaning of the word 'synagogue'. While common usage associates the name with a building and defines a synagogue as a place where Jews pray, the original meaning of the word was almost synonymous with 'congregation'. From a Greek root, '*syn*' and '*agein*' – to bring together – it denoted not so much a place as the people who gathered there. 'Congregation' means more or less the same: it is from Latin '*com*' and '*grex*', to collect as a flock. When the New Testament speaks scathingly about 'a synagogue of Satan' (Rev. 2:9), it is not attacking a building but a community. Hence, if the word 'synagogue' is correctly used, 'Central Synagogue' and 'Central Hebrew Congregation' mean the same thing.

In that sense it is possible to have the apparent paradox of a



Historic Hobart Hebrew Congregation

synagogue that has no synagogue. This could be said of Canberra [officially called the ACT Jewish community], where the community centre includes a dedicated orthodox synagogue, with a Liberal group holding services elsewhere in the building. This arrangement, arrived at after considerable controversy, enables both groups to be part of one community, with the Liberals as a synagogue without a synagogue. In time, the Liberal congregation hopes to have its own designated area for worship and will, therefore, become a synagogue with a synagogue. So far, neither congregational group has a separate identity or name.

The historic Hobart Hebrew Congregation has a heritage building in the centre of the city. To overcome internal conflicts, the creation of a community centre with two separate congregational sections has been suggested. In the meantime the synagogue building is shared, with the orthodox group holding certain services at a private house in a nearby suburb and some in Launceston, where the old synagogue needs repair and services take place in the Chabad House. In Launceston all the services are orthodox.

Hebrew Names

It is customary for the letters *Kuf Kuf* (short for *Kehillah Kedoshah*, holy congregation) to preface the Hebrew name of a congregation. The attribution of holy status to a congregation derives from Num. 16:3: 'For all the congregation are holy, all of them'. This does not imply that the congregants are all scrupulously pious but that they come together for sacred purposes.

Some congregations lived for years or decades with only an English name. An example is the St. Kilda Hebrew Congregation, which had no Hebrew name until the time of its second incumbent, Rabbi Jacob Danglow, who took up office in 1905, more than thirty years after the congregation was founded. Usually, however, an early concern of a congregation will be to decide on a Hebrew name. The choice is often based on a Biblical phrase. In Australia, two such phrases were especially popular—*Bet Yisra'el*, The House of Israel (adopted by the Great Synagogue, Sydney; Temple Beth Israel, Melbourne; and the Adelaide, Launceston and Newcastle Hebrew Congregations); and *She'erit Yisra'el*, The Remnant of Israel (adopted by the Melbourne, Perth and Ballarat Hebrew Congregations and the small congregation at the Maccabean Hall, Sydney, which operated from the late interwar period, and continues to function today).

Bet Yisra'el, found in Ex.16:31 and other Biblical passages, symbolises the determination of the early Jewish arrivals to

continue the long chain of Jewish history even in far-away Australia. *She'erit Yisra'el*, from Zeph.3:13 and elsewhere, acknowledges that Jews who came to Australia were few in number and felt themselves to be on the distant fringes of the Jewish world, a thought that is made explicit in Nathan Spielvogel's short stories about the beginnings of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation.

Another popular phrase was *Mikveh Yisra'el*, The Hope of Israel (from Jer.14:8), chosen by East Melbourne, Victoria, and Newtown, New South Wales. The symbolism is that God is Israel's hope; by a play on words the Hebrew also means 'The Cleansing Bath of Israel', since God cleanses the people of Israel from their sins (Yoma 8:9).



Interior of the Newtown Synagogue, Sydney

Two strictly orthodox congregations – one in Sydney and one in Melbourne – call themselves *Adat(h) Yisra'el*, The Congregation of Israel (Ex.12:3 etc.), following European precedents. Both congregations arose out of dissatisfaction with what was perceived as the religious laxity of the existing orthodox synagogues.

Other Biblical phrases used by Australian congregations include the following:

1. '*Beth Tephila*' (*Beth Tefillah*), House of Prayer (Isaiah.56:70) — the former George Street and Bridge Street Synagogues in Sydney, forerunners of York Street, Macquarie Street and the Great Synagogue.
2. '*Sukkat David*', The Tabernacle of David (Amos 9:11) — the former Macquarie Street Synagogue, Sydney, with which David Cohen & Co. was associated.
3. '*Orach Chayyim*', The Way of Life (Psalm16:15, etc.) — The Central Synagogue, Sydney.
4. '*Sha'arei Tzedek*', The Gates of Righteousness (Psalm118:19) — Cremorne Synagogue, Sydney.
5. '*Etz Chayyim*', The Tree of Life (Prov.11:3) — Elsternwick Jewish Community, Vic.
6. '*Netzach Yisra'el*', The Eternity of Israel (I Sam.15:29) — Southern Sydney (formerly Allawah) Synagogue.
7. '*Yeshurun*', Upright (Deut.32:15, etc.) — North-Eastern Jewish Centre, Melbourne.
8. '*Nefesh*', Soul (common in the Bible) — a recently formed young adult congregation in Bondi, Sydney.
9. '*Emanuel*', God With Us (Isa. 7:14 etc.) — the Emanuel Synagogue, Sydney.

There are names that, though not Biblical in themselves, are reminiscent of Biblical passages. These are examples:

1. '*Mach'zikei HaTorah*', Upholders of the Torah (reminiscent of Prov. 3:18) — The Roscoe Street Congregation, Bondi, Sydney.
2. '*Tzemach Tzedek*', The Righteous Scion (reminiscent of Isa.33:15) — a Chabad congregation in Bondi.
3. '*Shirah Chadashah*', A New Song (reminiscent of Isa. 42:10, Psalm 33:3 etc.) — a congregation in Melbourne. The name reflects the fact that the congregation follows the same approach to women's participation in the services, as its mother congregation with the same name in Jerusalem.

Several non-Biblical names focus on the word '*shalom*', peace: for example '*Ohavei Shalom*', Lovers of Peace — St. Kilda Hebrew Congregation, Vic.; and '*Ahavat Shalom*', Love of Peace — Caulfield Hebrew Congregation, Vic., and South Head and District Synagogue in Sydney. One hopes that these congregations not only preach peace but pursue it (cf. Psalm 33:15). In the case of Caulfield the name honours their first incumbent, Rabbi Sholem Gutnick.

Other non-Biblical names are the following:

1. 'Sha'arei Emunah', Gates of Faith - Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.
2. 'Or Chadash', New Light - a congregation in Bondi, Sydney.
3. 'Givat Tziyyon', Hill of Zion - South Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.

Some congregations have adopted the Hebrew names of a founder or philanthropist, for example:

1. 'Bet Avraham', House of Abraham - Elwood Talmud Torah Congregation, Melbourne, named for Abraham Hyam Sicree, a former president.
2. 'Bet Aharon', House of Aaron - Arnold Bloch Memorial Synagogue, East St. Kilda, Melbourne, named in memory of a communal leader.
3. 'Bet Nachman', House of Nachman - Kew Hebrew Congregation, Melbourne, named for Norman Smorgon.
4. 'Bet Shlomo', House of Solomon - Gold Coast Hebrew Congregation (originally Surfers Paradise Hebrew Congregation), named for Stanley Korman.
5. 'Ohel Devorah', Tent of Deborah - a Chabad congregation in Glen Eira, Melbourne, named for the mother of the then president.
6. 'Sasson Yehudah', Joy of Judah - a Sephardi congregation in St. Kilda, Melbourne, named for the father of philanthropist Albert Yehuda.

Another group of names has ideological connotations. A number of small Sephardi congregations in New South Wales are named after luminaries such as Rambam (Maimonides) (d. 1204), Joseph Caro (sixteenth century) and the Baba Sali, Israel Abuhatzzeira (d. 1984), the 'Praying Father' of the Moroccan community. The original Sephardi Synagogue at Bondi Junction is simply called 'Holy Congregation of Sephardim'. Chabad congregations frequently use the name of a former Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. *Tzemach Tzedek*, in Bondi, New South Wales, is named for the *magnum opus* of the second rebbe (rabbi) of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (d. 1866). In the Progressive community, the name of Leo Baeck, the twentieth century German Jewish thinker and leader, is perpetuated by the Leo Baeck Centre in Kew, Victoria.

Some names have a geographical provenance, for example the Bondi *Mizrachi* ('Eastern') Synagogue, Sydney. In contrast, *Mizrachi* in Melbourne was founded by the religious Zionist

(*Mizrachi*) movement, whose nineteenth century founders looked eastwards to Zion. Another Melbourne congregation is called '*Yotz'ei Russia*' (Jews from Russia). Though Jewish cultural and social centres were set up in Melbourne by Jews from Polish towns such as Lodz, Warsaw and Bialystok, their members were often non-religious and did not establish synagogues. The Hobart Hebrew Congregation, unusually for the colonial period, never had a conventional Hebrew name but was known as *K.K. Hobart* (originally *Hobart Town*). The most prosaic Hebrew name is *HaMerkaz Shelanu* ('Our Centre') founded to meet the needs of Israelis living in Melbourne. The two original synagogues in Brisbane were colloquially known as Margaret Street and Deshon Street. (After a fire, Deshon Street was replaced by a new building in the suburb of Greenslopes).

Liberal congregations generally choose short names. Reference has been made to Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne and Temple Emanuel, Woollahra, (now The Emanuel Synagogue) in Sydney. North Shore Temple Emanuel has retained its original name. Other progressive congregations include Temple David in Perth (named for King David); *Kedem* (Melbourne), an acronym for 'Progressive Congregation of King David School'; *Kadimah* ('Forward') on the New South Wales Central Coast; and a number that use the name '*Shalom*' (for example Gold Coast, Central Coast, Adelaide and Brisbane).

Unlike orthodoxy and Liberalism, Conservative Judaism is new on the Australian scene. It exists only in Sydney, where it forms part of the Emanuel Synagogue, and in Melbourne, where its congregation is called '*Nitzan*', Bud, because it is the first independent Conservative group in the Antipodes.

Conclusion

What do congregations do with their Hebrew names? Members of the older establishment congregations tend to treat them as merely part of their synagogue letterheads or words emblazoned on the gates or front doors of the building. Newer groups take much more pride in their Hebrew titles, using them when referring to their synagogues and drawing constant lessons from them.

The old custom of having double names, English and Hebrew, has been largely abandoned by many of these groups. In some communities it is the convention for everybody to use the initials of the English name – in Perth, for instance, the letters 'PHC' (Perth Hebrew Congregation) and in Melbourne 'TBI' (Temple Beth Israel) make perfect sense. In some places there are widely accepted nicknames – in Sydney, 'The Great' (once upon a time its nickname

was 'The Big *Shule* (Yiddish for synagogue)'; in Melbourne, 'Toorak' (for the present location of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation; before the move to Toorak Road, the community used to speak of 'Bourke Street'). Elsewhere, hardly anybody knows the congregation's English name or even whether it has one – examples are '*Nefesh*' in Sydney and '*Hama'ayan*' in Melbourne.

NOTE

Though there are histories of a number of congregations they often give no information about the congregation's Hebrew name; presumably this means that the name was a formality and rarely taken seriously.