

SOLOMON ALFRED ADLER IN THE ANTIPODES

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The name 'Australia' has always had a magical appeal for people in Britain. Over the years many 'Brits' came to settle. Some succeeded in their new environment: a small number sadly made their way back home. The gentry who had the time and money for travel came to Australia on a visit, including various members of the Royal Family, such as Prince Alfred, the son of Queen Victoria. Another Alfred was amongst the Jewish visitors – Rev Solomon Alfred Adler (1876-1910), who journeyed to the Antipodes for health reasons in 1899. He was the son of Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler, preacher to the prestigious Bayswater Synagogue from 1863 until 1890 before succeeding his father Nathan Marcus Adler as chief rabbi of England and the Empire. The Adler dynasty in the chief rabbinate might well have continued had Solomon Alfred Adler not died before his father. The historians are not certain, however, whether the firm policy of ecclesiastical control dubbed by its detractors 'Adlerism' would have been maintained by Alfred Adler, who seems to have been a more pliable character than his father and grandfather.¹

Hermann Adler and his wife Rachael (nee Joseph) had two daughters – Henrietta (Nettie) (1868-1950), a communal and public worker, and Ruth (1869-1933), who married an educationalist, Dr Alfred Eichholz (the family later used the surname Eccles); and a son, Alfred. The latter entered the Jewish ministry and served at the Hope Place Synagogue, Liverpool, from 1902 and the Hammersmith Synagogue, London, from 1904-1909. His reports from the City of London School suggest that he was merely an average student, though ill health may have affected his schoolwork. He studied at Jews' College, London, and also read widely in the classics and contemporary literature. As a child he was known as Solomon, as we see from the Barmitzvah address, which his father delivered at the Bayswater Synagogue on Shabbat Shemot, 22 December 1888. He was possibly named after his father's uncle, Baron Solomon Benedict de Worms, a descendant of the famous Saul Wahl.

One of Solomon's earliest sermons was delivered at Rhyl, North Wales, in August 1898 when he was probably staying at one of several Jewish boarding houses on holiday. At that stage he was called 'Mr' (not Rev) Alfred Adler. From time to time the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that he preached at other places. He gave a *Sukkot* sermon in 1901 at the Notting Hill Synagogue, not far from his parents' Bayswater home in Craven Hill.

In his book described below, are reprinted a number of festival sermons – mostly written in language of extraordinary beauty - which may have been given at the synagogues he served, or more possibly were written for the *Jewish Chronicle* and not necessarily delivered from the pulpit.

He suffered from chronic ill health, apparently a serious lung complaint, from his childhood. In his Barmitzvah address, his father spoke of 'your own little life...the trials you have endured' and said:

There is sunshine in your heart, as there is sunshine in Nature.
But Nature will not always smile upon you as it does now. You
have had some little experience of the difficulties that lie in
your path....²

Because of those difficulties, Alfred travelled extensively to warmer climes. During the Boer War he was in South Africa and took a special interest in the Jewish soldiers 'who have proved with their life's blood that the spirit of Judas Maccabeus still walks abroad'. His observations may well place him in the ranks of the great Jewish travellers, Benjamin Tudela and others, from whom we learn so much about the world and the Jewish people at fascinating turns of history.

Adler arrived in Sydney from Melbourne in January 1900. The *Hebrew Standard* of 12 January carried the following report:

Mr. Adler, son of the Rev. Dr. Adler, Chief Rabbi of England, arrived in Sydney on Tuesday last. He was met at the Redfern Station by the Rev. A.B. Davis, Mr. Louis Phillips (President), and Mr. H. Harris [owner of the *Hebrew Standard*]. Mr. Adler made a short visit to Maitland on Wednesday and returns to Sydney to-day.

Mr. Adler is a young man, having only seen 24 summers, but he has lost no time in climbing to the high altitudes of experience. In fact it is over-study that has rendered his present tour a necessity. He has even been among our soldiers at the Cape, and speaks with thorough English pride of the struggle the various regiments are making to hurry to the front. Being a journalist he has written his experience in order to disabuse

the prevalent opinion that there is something wrong with the transport arrangements. Of Jewish matters Mr Adler speaks with pleasure of the enthusiasm of the South African Jews, as they appear to be very contented and prosperous communities. The Victorian Jews, in their anxious desire to do honor (*sic*) to the scion of the illustrious house of Adler, broke down all attempts to avoid notice being taken of his presence in the colony, and by their hospitality enabled him to carry off fond memories of his brief sojourn among them. In Sydney he has found old friends in the Rev A. B. Davis and the Rev. P. Philippstein. The former he recollects from his visit to England. Mr. Adler regrets that he may not be able to visit Perth, as the Rev D. I. Freedman and he were schoolfellows, and Perth has the reputation in England of being a very happy community – both religiously and socially.³

Whilst in Sydney he was taken ill and entered St. Vincent's Hospital, near the then Montefiore Home in South Dowling Street, Darlinghurst, where he was staying. He speaks of 'a bed of sickness, hazy and indistinct... a period of white-winged angels, a smother of flowers, fruit, and physic, where warm-hearted Australian rabbis and their congregation sit in silent sympathy beside the bedside of their sick London co-religionist.' He praises the Montefiore Home and suggests its external appearance when he calls it 'red in the face'.

Pesach, 1900, saw him in Wellington, New Zealand. At the time of the Relief of Ladysmith that year he was in Dunedin in the South Island. He was the first Anglo-Jewish minister to visit so many colonial congregations, who all warmly welcomed him and enjoyed the personal contact with a member of the chief rabbi's family. Presumably he stayed with the local ministers in many or most of the places he visited, or at least had Sabbath and festival meals with them.

On the seventh day of Passover, 1900, he said in a sermon in Wellington:

The real meaning of Judaism had not dawned on me until I saw it flourishing amid the varied aspects of colonial life: it had not dawned on me what Judaism had been in the past, what it was in the present and what it might be in the future until I saw my co-religionists zealously maintaining their religious identity amidst the distractions and feverish excitements of pastoral and agricultural pursuits, of gold-diggings, of war - until, under the Southern Cross, suspended like a half-flung kite in the star-fed skies, I heard the old prayers uttered in that

language so bound up with magnificent associations, that language which has become so thoroughly identified with our national consciousness...⁴

On his return to England he became involved in the emergent Brondesbury Synagogue in northwest London and he worked to create Hebrew and Religion classes for the children of the district.

At this stage he wavered between being a minister or a writer, and dabbled in both. He described his travels in articles for the *Jewish Chronicle (JC)* and other papers. He wrote a children's column for *Israel* magazine. Some of his sermons and lectures were later printed in a book of 150 pages entitled 'The Discipline of Sorrow, with a foreword by 'RE', (his sister Ruth).

From his book, *The Discipline of Sorrow*, we can gain an insight into his ideas, style and thinking. Writing seemed to come easily to him. He was more poetical and passionate than his father, whose sermons were rather heavy and ponderous, though Hermann was capable of being fierce and combative when the moment called for it. Alfred's book shows a broad acquaintance with contemporary issues, ranging from the Russian pogroms to the intellectual challenges to religion in the restless 1890s, and touches on academic issues such as the history and nature of the Biblical Song of Songs. The first sermon in the book is a brave attempt to address the age-old problem of evil ('How can a good God allow so much sorrow and suffering in His creation?'). The ultimate answer to the problem eludes him, though he recognises the uses of adversity:

In sorrow is the germ of blessedness; out of partial evil cometh universal good, and in the wider vision of life we can see mankind united through suffering, and the tender mercy of God brooding lovingly over all His works.⁵

The book reprints his induction address in Liverpool where, discussing the duties of a Jewish minister, he warns against mere 'brilliant oratory and studied eloquence'. Looking at the first rabbi, Moses, he says, 'Was Moses a great orator? No; he was a man. And the world wants men, and God desires the hearts of men.' Speaking personally, he says, 'Try to smooth my path. I do not ask for an easy ministry. I am content and willing to work – God granting me health and strength – but my efforts cannot bear fruit unless I can rely upon your cordial co-operation, your ready sympathy'.⁶

There is a blunt sermon given at Hammersmith in which he inveighs against bringing a spirit of commercialism into the House of God 'with idle chatter of the market-place and of the counting-

house', and objects to the then common phenomenon of the minister having also to be the synagogue secretary – 'the preacher turned bank-clerk'. He pleads for the minister to receive an adequate stipend: 'We have the shame and degradation in our midst, that men of refinement, education, and spirituality are toiling for a living wage, are fighting for existence on a mere pittance.'⁷

A section of the book is entitled 'Travel Sketches' and reflects his experiences in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. These pieces traverse the cities, the bush and the veldt. They move from 'The *Ma'oz Tzur* sung on the lower slopes of Table Mountain' to 'Sydney, city of towers and minarets and joy...the concentration of all that is best in Australia'; Melbourne, which he likens to prose whilst Sydney is poetry, and manifests 'transatlantic massiveness'; and Hobart, 'Southampton on a small scale...the sanatorium of Australia'. Tasmania is 'a charming little lodge leading to a stately mansion – Australia'. Auckland is 'Corinthia by the double Pacific surf'; Wellington is 'a Lucerne of the Southern Hemisphere'. He describes other parts of New Zealand too, as well as encounters with the Maori people and their culture. He briefly mentions some of the theories as to how the Maoris originated. There are observations on many of the synagogues he visited and some of their ministers (Rabbi Samuel A. Goldstein of Auckland is 'a rabbi sweet and lovable'; the Hobart Synagogue is 'one of the prettiest in the world').⁸

His section on the synagogues of Melbourne and Sydney warrants quotation in full:

There are three synagogues in Melbourne to provide for the religious needs of about five thousand co-religionists – the Bourke Street, the East Melbourne, and the St. Kilda. None of them are remarkable, either externally or internally. They are pretty and efficient. With a considerably larger Jewish population than Melbourne, Sydney has only one synagogue, but it is, in truth, a great synagogue. Both within and without it is one of the sights of a city, the public buildings of which are of acknowledged magnificence. It is not unlike the new West End Synagogue – its architecture Byzantine – a little sombre perhaps, but more emphatically a Beth Haknaseth (*sic*) than anything which I have seen in the Colonies.⁹

These observations may be partially lost on later generations, which would not realise that Adler was in Melbourne long before the present Toorak Road and St. Kilda Synagogues were built, replacing the admittedly modest buildings that Adler visited. Both in Melbourne and Sydney the number of synagogues has since grown considerably,

but the Great Synagogue remains on its original city site and is still one of the grandest buildings in Sydney, though now dwarfed by high-rise edifices all around. Even so, there was at least one other small congregation, the Baron Hirsch Minyan, in Sydney at the time. Adler could not, however, have envisaged the events of the twentieth century and the increase in and diversification of the Australian Jewish population, which changed so many things.

We would have liked Adler to give us a colleague's eye view of ministers such as Rabbi Dr Joseph Abrahams, Rev Solomon Marks Solomon, Rev Jacob Lenzer and Rev Elias Blaubaum of Melbourne, and Rev Alexander B. Davis and his Sydney colleagues. It might also have been useful to have a comment on the challenges to the ministerial establishment mounted by the so-called 'foreign' rabbis, Hirschowitz, Bramson and others and the tensions that they engendered with their more 'Anglo' colleagues¹⁰

Alfred Adler was much more positive towards Zionism than was his father, who saw political Zionism as 'an egregious blunder' and was not very impressed when Theodor Herzl called on him. Herzl had thought Britain would take to Zionism enthusiastically, and he indeed found that Haham Dr Moses Gaster and others were strong supporters of the cause. The chief rabbi, however, seemed more interested in *shehitah* than Zionism; at the time he was embroiled in fiery controversies caused by the hostility of the new *Mahzikei HaDath* congregation towards the establishment *kashrut* system, with both sides appealing to leading continental authorities for support, and at that point a conversation on the Zionist programme might have been a rather unwanted distraction or an academic luxury for the much-beset Chief Rabbi Adler.

The chief rabbi may not have come under Herzl's spell, but the rabbi's son did. The final chapter in Alfred Adler's book is entitled, 'Thoughts Suggested by the Death of Dr. Theodor Herzl'.¹¹ He points out that whether or not one agreed with the Zionist political platform, Herzl, over the short space of nine years in Jewish public life, had attracted the devotion of large masses of the Jewish people: 'Herzl was to them – and by them – endowed with almost supernatural powers'. He describes his first encounter with Herzl – 'tall, leonine, and inspiring...here was genius, real and unflattered'. In the capacity of a journalist, Adler was in attendance at the fifth and sixth Zionist Congresses in Basle and since Herzl seemed to have liked articles which he had written about him and the movement, the two 'spent many pleasant moments' together. Yet, when the East Africa scheme was being debated, 'I saw his face pale, his muscles twitch...Perhaps he felt that, strong man as he was, he had somehow failed...Perhaps he died of a broken heart. Who can tell?'¹²

Alfred Adler was a young man of talent and lineage, but being unmarried and having limited physical stamina would have militated against his ever becoming chief rabbi. We are not certain of his level of rabbinic learning, but had things been different his father would have sent him to the Continent to study with the great *halakhic* authorities. That is the way in which Hermann Adler himself had gained his rabbinic training. The years of illness took their toll, however, and Alfred Adler died of consumption on 29 November 1910, aged 34. His chronic illness could have turned him away from religion, but it did the opposite. In one of the sermons in his book he wrote:

In my own life, suffering and obstacles have proved not a mystery but a revelation of God; not a darkness, but an exceeding great Light; not a silence, but a Voice – the Voice of God: pain has made me realise, not deny Him; has brought me nearer unto Him, not estranged me from His Presence.¹³

His father had said when Alfred was Barmitzvah, ‘There is sunshine in your heart’. However, the sunshine did not last. A relative, Major Henry D. Myer, wrote: ‘He (Alfred) was a sad man. Rightly or wrongly, he felt unsuited for his calling and having contracted tuberculosis retired from the ministry. I believe he was talented and that many appreciated his poetry and his idealism.’¹⁴ The Zionist movement remembered that Alfred had called himself ‘A Lover of My People’ and the East London Zionist Association appealed for funds to inscribe him in the Golden Book of the Jewish National Fund.

Hermann Adler died in July 1911. There was now no Adler to succeed him, and the post of chief rabbi eventually went, after much communal canvassing and controversy, to Dr Joseph Herman Hertz, who held office until 1946 and was the first chief rabbi to visit Australia and the other overseas British dominions, and wrote a book about his journeys. If Alfred Adler deserves to be counted amongst the great Jewish travellers, so does Hertz. Later chief rabbis were able to travel by air without great difficulty, and the mantle of Benjamin of Tudela did not really rest on their shoulders.

ENDNOTES

1. A lifetime interest in the Adlers began from the moment I entered the Anglo-Jewish ministry, commencing at the historic Bayswater Synagogue where Hermann Adler had been the first Preacher. In 1970 I worked on the Adler Collection at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America thanks to a Robert Waley Cohen Travel Scholarship awarded by the Jewish Memorial Council, London.

Apart from a formal report to the JMC and a public lecture for the United Synagogue on 'The Adlers and Anglo-Jewry', I researched and wrote papers on Nathan Marcus Adler, his son and successor Hermann Adler, and another son Elkan Adler, who incidentally visited Australia in the 1930s on legal business. Some of the material in New York was also used for papers on members of the London Beth Din such as Dayan Dr Moses Hyamson, whom Joseph Herman Hertz defeated for the post of chief rabbi after Hermann Adler's death in 1911. In regard to Solomon Alfred Adler, I found some material in the Adler Collection, consulted an Adler relative, the late Major Henry Myer, and worked through Alfred Adler's book, *The Discipline of Sorrow* (London: Routledge, 1911).

2. Hermann Adler, published text of Barmitzvah sermon for his son.
3. *Hebrew Standard of Australasia*, 12 January 1899.
4. Adler, published text of Wellington sermon; *Sorrow*, p. 105.
5. Adler, *The Discipline of Sorrow*, p. 12.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
8. *Ibid.*, section on 'Travel Sketches', pp. 105-141.
9. *Ibid.*, p.132.
10. Suzanne D. Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora: Two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia* (Sydney: Collins Australia, 1988), p.78.
11. Adler, *Sorrow*, p.142-150.
12. *Ibid.*, p.148-9.
13. *Ibid.*, p.2.
14. Henry D. Myer, personal letter to me dated November 1970.