

## IS THERE A MINHAG AUSTRALIA

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**H**istorically, every Jewish community seems to have developed its own *minhag* (style and usage). The word *minhag* is often understood in merely liturgical or pietistic terms, indicating, 'This is what is done in (many or most) synagogues in a particular country'. We discern a *minhag* in the style of a worship service, the preferred version of a key prayer, the melodies used for psalms and *piyyutim* (religious poems), the stance and 'aerobics' of the worshippers, and the rubrics of the prayer book. An example is the Singer *siddur*, the prayer book of the (Ashkenazi) 'United Hebrew Congregations' of Britain and the Commonwealth, which (until 1990) stated on the Hebrew title page that it followed *Minhag Polin*, 'the Polish usage', brought to Britain by eighteenth century Ashkenazi immigrants. The 2006 edition added the words, *Minhag Anglia*, 'the English usage'. However, *Minhag Anglia* may by now be a thing of the past: it reflected Britain's nineteenth century Christian environment, which stressed preaching, hymn singing and decorum.

*Minhag* can also be seen in a broader sense as the 'feel' and face of the Jews of a given country. In this sense *minhag* echoes the traits of the majority society. Thus the 'English' usage is rather formal and genteel; the 'German' usage is dignified and precise; the 'American' usage is modern and sometimes brash. The question in this paper is whether there is a *Minhag Australia*, in either sense of the word, and if so whether we can identify the factors that moulded it. We begin with pietistic expressions of Judaism, and then turn to broader themes.

### **The British Heritage**

Life for European Australians for a long period from 1788 was visibly British. The British heritage came to the Antipodes with the First Fleet. Whether or not this implies that English law automatically applied in the new environment, is not our concern in this paper. What *is* our concern is whether the liturgy of London

Judaism had automatic authority for the early Australian Jews. The answer seems to be yes.

The Jews regarded themselves as an extension of Anglo-Jewry and made their model the practices of the mother country, symbolised by the Great Synagogue and Bevis Marks – the ‘mother’ Ashkenazi and Sephardi congregations - in the City of London. Since almost all the early Australian Jews were Ashkenazi, any religious questions were referred to the chief rabbi of the London Ashkenazim, though most Australian Jews never set eyes on him personally unless they paid a visit ‘home’. From 1921 the chief rabbis themselves made it a practice to visit ‘the overseas dominions’. Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz was the first chief rabbi to tour Australia; and once international air travel became established after the Second World War, rabbinic ‘royal visits’ took place with increasing frequency. During the incumbency of Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie from 1948-1965, a particularly warm feeling bound him to Australia, where he had earlier spent fourteen years (1923-1937) as rabbi of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation.

Australian synagogue services included a prayer for the Royal Family, subsequently expanded to include the Governor General and State Governors. In the 1970s, the present writer, then the senior rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, gave the prayer a more Australian flavour, later adding a reference to Australia’s indigenous population and their culture and spirituality. With the weakening of ties to Britain, however, the British point of reference for Australian Jews has declined, and religious decisions are now almost always made locally. This loosening of the apron-strings was inevitable once Australian synagogues ceased to be more or less homogeneous and centrist orthodoxy lost its pre-eminence, with both the liberal/reform movement and ultra-orthodoxy gaining strength in Australia and looking outside Britain for religious guidance.

#### **Australia’s Locality and Climate**

British mores could never compete with the Australian weather and seasons, though amongst non-Jews the December heat took many decades to overcome Christmas customs that derived from the cold and snow of the Northern Hemisphere. Eventually beer and barbecues replaced holly and Christmas puddings.

Australia’s locality and climate influenced Jewish liturgical practices almost from the beginning, with the prayers for rain and dew exchanged in some synagogues (especially under the influence of Rabbi Francis Lyon Cohen of Sydney) to accord with the Australian seasons. These changes were reversed over time, and the prayers concerned now follow the more general Jewish usage, reflecting the seasons in the Land of Israel.

The Australian summer heat allowed a relaxation of synagogue dress codes, so that men even came to synagogue in shorts and sandals. Where once men wore their street hats to services in order to pray with covered heads, and boys wore school caps or boaters – now street hats and school uniform are a thing of the past, and almost every male wears a skull cap (*kippah*) in the synagogue. The women have abandoned hats and gloves, which have also largely disappeared in general society, and apart from the strictly orthodox synagogues hardly any women today wear head covering to synagogue.

Other geographical influences include the Hebrew versions of synagogue names. The early arrivals felt so distant from the main centres of Jewish life that many congregations used the Biblical name *She'erit Yisra'el*, Remnant of Israel. A *halakhic* (Jewish legal) question arose in regard to divorce documents (*gittin*), which must state the place as well as the date, requiring the Melbourne and Sydney *batei din* (rabbinical courts) to work out how to refer in Hebrew to Melbourne's Yarra River or Sydney's seaside location.

Whilst in the nineteenth century a visible minority of Australian Jews lived outside the main cities, the twentieth century saw the disappearance of almost all the Jewish country communities, because Australia was so vast and it was easier to centralise Jewish life in the capital cities. These now include Canberra, though its population numbers do not yet warrant a *kosher* shop or Jewish school. The last few decades have seen a new Jewish presence in a number of country districts, especially in the eastern States, partly because of professional and commercial opportunities and the pleasant way of life, and partly because some families deliberately choose places where Jewish community bonds are not so firm and people are freer to follow a less committed lifestyle.

In one of these communities the nature of the High Holyday services depends on who pays to bring the officiant. He who pays the piper calls the tune: sometimes there is a *hassidic* service, sometimes a reform/liberal one. In some areas such as the Northern Territory the only regular religious presence is RARA ('Rural and Regional Australia'), a *Habad hassidic* group which organises community *Sedarim* on Passover, providing not only the officiants but also the service booklets and the food. Recently RARA revived Jewish worship in Wollongong, New South Wales, where the synagogue closed down and the small community disbanded about thirty years ago.

### **Immigration**

Immigration constantly repopulated Australian Jewry; in recent decades it has reshaped Australian Judaism and made it less British.

Starting with 1788, the first immigrants - convicts and free settlers - came from Britain, though the discovery of gold in the middle of the nineteenth century attracted Jews from much further afield. Persecution and pogroms in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century brought Jews from Russia and Poland. The Anglo-Jewish ethos, however, remained dominant for about the first century and a half after 1788, though often the commercial 'grandees' had no British background.

From the late 1930s, immigration from Europe brought Jews from a range of traditions. *Minhag Anglia* with its relaxed orthodoxy was challenged by people from more intensely Jewish backgrounds, including Eastern European *hassidic* (pietistic) groups. *Habad/Lubavitch hassidim*, from small beginnings in Shepparton, Victoria, established by the Habad families, the Feiglins and in 1948 establishing the first formal Yeshiva in Shepparton, are now seen everywhere, and many mainstream congregations have *Habad* rabbis. The reform (liberal) movement, founded in the 1930s and strengthened by Jews from Germany and Austria, is a significant segment of the communal scene, although still only attracting around 20-30% of Australian Jews in formal membership. Melbourne and Sydney now also have congregations that follow the North American Conservative ideology, which is not-quite-orthodox-not-quite-reform. Israeli and Russian immigrants are often non-religious, but a handful of Israeli-style prayer groups have been established, especially under *Habad* auspices. Former South Africans have reinforced mainstream orthodoxy. Australian Judaism is now a veritable kaleidoscope.

### **Australian History**

Australian history has not greatly affected the practice of Judaism, though at the time of Federation there was a move to federate the Jewish communities under an overall roof body. This was only achieved over four decades later with the establishment of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry in 1944, followed by the Association of (Orthodox) Jewish Ministers and subsequently the Progressive rabbinical association. With around 120,000 Jews, Australia is now the ninth largest Jewish community in the world, and Australian delegates are highly regarded and play a major role in international bodies such as the World Jewish Congress, the World Zionist Organisation, B'nai B'rith and WIZO. Seminal events in recent Australian history mostly have no particularly Jewish dimension; there are Jews on both sides of national debates on, for example, the future of the monarchy in Australia. However, some Jews view every development as ethical in nature and insist on a

Jewish ethical response, for example in relation to Aboriginal reconciliation and the admission of 'boat people' who arrive claiming to be refugees. The whole of Australian Jewry, apart from fringe elements whose views are generally rejected as unrepresentative, carefully monitors government attitudes to Israel and protests when it feels the Jewish State is being misunderstood and maligned.

### **Multiculturalism**

There was multiculturalism in Australia long before the word itself was coined. It allowed Australian Jewry to maintain its distinctive practices and interests within the wider national spectrum; indeed, recently arrived ethnic groups, including the Muslims, now consult the Jewish community in relation to their own position in Australian life (and law). Jews often play a leading role in the community relations councils. The Jewish community is an equal partner in the Councils of Christians and Jews, though some Christian groups still find it theologically difficult to recognise Judaism as a legitimate faith option. Some cities have ministers' fraternals, but very rarely is a Jew invited to join, though there will occasionally be a lecture by a rabbi.

Organisations that promote dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims have so far had little success, possibly because the Muslim community is unused to a culture of interfaith debate and discussion. Internally, the Jewish roof bodies have a policy of pluralism, acknowledging and granting equal standing to all religious opinions, although orthodoxy generally denies religious legitimacy to the reform/liberal movement.

### **Financial Factors**

The goods and services tax (GST) has affected Judaism in that synagogue membership fees (which usually go with a set seat in the synagogue) have been questioned by the tax office. Some rabbis argue that having one's own spot in the synagogue (and paying a fee for it) is required by the Talmud for the sake of effective prayer, and as a religious facility should be exempt from GST. This argument cannot however be used by congregations which do not allocate set seating. A further financial consideration is that security has become one of the costliest items on communal budgets; though government subsidies have been requested, most of the expense still falls on the community.

### **Educational Developments**

Educational developments – especially a broader range of schools – have aided the late twentieth century resurgence of the Jewish day school movement (the nineteenth century Jewish schools in Sydney and Melbourne had closed down by 1900) together with rabbinical

colleges whose courses have won government accreditation. It was not until the 1960s that Australia gained its first locally born rabbis. Even today almost every Australian rabbi has studied overseas. Many young people undertake periods of study in *yeshivot* (Talmudic colleges) in Israel or elsewhere and most synagogues offer adult courses. Universities offer a range of Jewish subjects, not only Bible Studies and Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish language and literature, but Jewish law, Holocaust Studies and Middle Eastern politics. Jewish colleges at two NSW universities bring scholars from overseas who provide high-level lectures and courses for the wider community.

### **Religious Standards**

In easy-going Australia, Jewish religious practice was, and often still is, rather lax. In the early days it was difficult to obtain *kosher* food (in the nineteenth century a rabbi from the Holy Land was asked in a synagogue board room in Adelaide, 'Where is *kosher* meat commanded in the Decalogue?').<sup>1</sup> Many people from strictly observant homes abandoned not only the dietary laws but also the full observance of the Sabbath, especially the ban on using transport that day. Few women immersed in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) after their monthly period. Sydney Jewry did not get an official *mikveh* until 1943. Membership of an orthodox synagogue rarely indicated orthodox observance at home, though a few congregations would not accept members who did not observe the Sabbath strictly. This laid-back Australianism has, however, gradually changed, and today an increasing number of families are fully practising, sometimes for the sake of youngsters who have studied overseas and returned to Australia as strictly orthodox Jews. Converts to Judaism who often previously asked why they had to be more observant than the rest of the community now have a more positive attitude to observance.

### **Attitudes and Ideologies**

Probably due to the effects of British pragmatism, thinking was rare as a feature of the Australian experience until recently. Philosophy and ethics only began to be debated after World War II, partly due to Jewish immigrants from Continental Europe. Today there is a new interest in attitudes (and prejudices). Jews, who once took Australian fair play for granted, face a new existential problem, manifestations of antisemitism on the hitherto tolerant Australian scene. They are shocked at having to protect their institutions against attack, and concerned at having to use scarce resources to pay for armed guards. Fearing that racist attitudes have entered with immigrant groups, they ask where the pendulum will rest when such groups have integrated into Australian society. From another point of view,

however, most Jews welcome recent efforts at Aboriginal reconciliation. Leading Jewish figures have involved themselves in work for the well being of the Aborigines.

### **Theology**

It might be thought that the one thing that would have remained unchanged in Australia was Jewish theology, but a large proportion of the community is comprised of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, many of whom are still angry that God let them down. They are determined to remain culturally Jewish but are not certain that they want to believe in or pray to a deity who stands for goodness and mercy. God is squarely on the Australian Jewish agenda even if it is only to reject Him. Crowds come to debates on subjects such as “Did God survive the Holocaust?” Jewish identity as a whole arouses much discussion, with issues such as ‘Can one have Judaism without God?’ and ‘Is Zionism part of Judaism?’

### **Statistics**

The five-yearly national census contains an optional question about religion. Taking into account those who choose not to answer this question, and those who state they have no religion, the figures of Jews in Australia have to be corrected upwards, producing (in 2012) a number of at least 120,000.<sup>2</sup> Measured against Israel and the USA, this is not a high number, but it represents a largely cohesive and committed group, a large proportion of whom are identifiable and in some way associated with Jewish causes. The details of Jewish demography and attitudes within Australian Jewry have been recently investigated by the GEN08 study, led by Professor Andrew Markus, from the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University, supported by key community groups, including JewishCare Victoria and the Jewish Communal Appeal in Sydney.<sup>3</sup>

Jews constitute less than 0.5% of the Australian nation, but despite these small numbers they have made major contributions to Australian life and development. If we ask whether Australian Jews are religious, the answer on one level is measured by affiliation to establishment religion and observance of the set rituals. In that sense Australian Jewry is not passionately religious, though some are growing more committed. But if the question is whether Australian Jews are moved by spiritual concerns, the answer is yes. Atheism is no more normative than faith. Especially amongst the young there is a palpable sense of concern with ultimate questions, but so far there are few rabbis or teachers who are competent to help them.

### **Jewish Civil Religion**

Whatever their particular angle on or quarrel with Judaism as a religious position, almost every Australian Jew wants to be Jewish. In most cases they use Jewish avenues to express their social concern. Almost all feel they have to do something for the community, especially its charities, and for Israeli causes, though a vocal minority criticises everything that Israel does. Almost all want to be seen and counted at communal rallies. Some find their pleasure in organisational work – holding office, attending meetings, raising funds, and seeing their name in the Jewish papers. It could be said to be a form of religion, though it is ‘civil’ and not ‘religious religion’ in the traditional sense. The community as a whole is often frustrated at the power struggles between orthodoxy and non-orthodoxy, and in pursuance of a wish for inclusivism has allowed or encouraged the lay roof bodies to take charge of certain events which would otherwise be held in synagogues, such as Holocaust commemorations and Israel anniversary celebrations. The spirit of egalitarianism has encouraged women to come into communal leadership – even in some cases in the orthodox synagogues.

### **In General Society**

Jews as individuals were always involved in civic and national life, though the number of Jewish parliamentarians has declined in the postwar period.<sup>4</sup> From the mid-twentieth century the corporate Jewish community was visible and audible in defence of Jewish causes, such as State aid to religion, educational facilities, immigration policies, anti-racism and anti-Zionism. Communal advocacy groups have taken up the cause of specific groups and individuals, for example in relation to Sephardi immigration and the right of Australian *olim* to hold both Australian and Israeli passports. In democratic Australia lobby groups are a fact of life. When necessary the Jewish community takes a bold stand on matters that do not necessarily affect Jews specifically, such as Aboriginal Reconciliation.<sup>5</sup> Jews feel at ease within Australian society, though sometimes there are gentile grumbles about supposed ‘Jewish power’.

### **Conclusion**

It is doubtful whether a visitor to Australia could complete a sentence of this kind: ‘The Australian Jews I met were...’ Adjectives like friendly, helpful, and so on might be used, but could be applied to many communities. It could certainly be said that Australian Jews are keenly interested in Israel, but Australia has no monopoly in this respect. There may be other countries where adjectives (*yekkish* – Germanically precise; urbane; passionate) could be found to describe



the overall impression of the Jewish community, but in Australia it seems difficult. If *Minhag Australia* is the summing up of the traits of the community, one wonders whether it actually exists. There is no one characteristic feel and philosophy that distinctively sums up Australian Jewish life. Perhaps Australian Jewry, for all its relatively small size, is too diverse for that. There is certainly an overarching feeling of cohesiveness and solidarity, of being part of each other, though that alone does not constitute a *minhag*. There are certain accepted habits: most Australian Jews, for example, read or are aware of what is said in the *Australian Jewish News* and constantly criticise the paper – but that is not a *minhag*. Nor can we apply the term to the fact that well over half of the community belong to synagogues, donate to Israel appeals and local charities, and send their children to Jewish schools - or that whenever there is a crisis, especially in or involving Israel, Australian Jewry acts as one. These are all impressive phenomena. But to a greater or smaller extent they are not unique to Australia. If *Minhag Australia* exists, it is still elusive.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Rabbi Jacob Levi Saphir, Even Saphir noted this in his travelogue, *Eben Saphir*, translated by Rabbi Lieb A. Falk, 'A Hebrew Travel Book', *AJHS Journal*, vol 1, part 6, (1941). p.194.
2. According to the Australian census of 2011, there are 97,335 Jews in Australia. Most demographers allow for a 20% underenumeration, making the Jewish population around 120,000.
3. The various reports produced by GEN08 can be downloaded from <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/gen08/>.
4. Michael Danby was the only Jewish member of Federal Parliament from 1998 to 2007, when Mark Dreyfus, also from the Labor Party, was elected. In the 2010 election, Josh Frydenberg was elected, representing the Liberal Party. All three represent Melbourne electorates.
5. For a detailed discussion of Jews and the indigenous Australian population, see Anne Sarzin and Lara Sarzin, *Hand in Hand: Jewish and Indigenous People Working Together* (Sydney: Port Campbell Press, 2012).