

THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BALLARAT SYNAGOGUE

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On the weekend of 1 to 3 April 2011, a number of events were held in Ballarat to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the consecration of the beautiful synagogue. Rabbi Jonathan Keren Black conducted the Shabbat service, and Rabbi Dr John Levi gave the address.

Many readers will be familiar with the story of the Ballarat community, but the editors have inserted the following italicised preface, to 'set the scene'.

There was enormous excitement in Melbourne when Victoria separated from New South Wales in 1850, but the celebration paled with the discovery of gold in Victoria in the middle of 1851 – 10,000 men clawed the ground in Ballarat in frenzy, and Melbourne was emptied of its idlers and 'superior' class alike. Commercial life was frozen.

It is estimated that in the next ten years almost 600,000 people arrived in Victoria from interstate and overseas. In the four years from 1851 to early 1854, three million pounds weight of gold was discovered in Ballarat, worth £50 per pound.

By 1853 sufficient Jews could be encouraged from the goldfields into town, to hold a Kol Nidre service in the dining room of the Clarendon Hotel in Lydiard Street, owned by Henry Harris. The cantor was a digger wearing a red shirt and the high boots of a miner.

Two years later, in November 1855, a synagogue was constructed in Barkly Street to accommodate 200 people, and Henry Harris was to be the first president. They could also afford a minister, Rev David Isaacs from Geelong, who was paid the enormous sum of £220 per annum (but by 1863 Isaacs was to be a plaintiff in a law suit against the committee for money owing – by then the gold was harder to find!).

Just a year after the synagogue was built, the land on which it stood was reclaimed by the local council for use as Municipal Chambers. With the money paid as compensation the congregation purchased the site on the corner of Princes and Barkly Streets. But even that location brought problems, as two squatters claimed the land as their own, and had paid rates and taxes on it. The congregation had to pay the squatters out, and in fact did not obtain clear title to the land until 1874.

Meanwhile, Charles Dyte became the president, and he laid the foundation stone in January 1861. Just two months later the synagogue was finished, at the

then huge cost of £1,600. It was consecrated by Rev. Isaacs at a service on 17 March 1861, although it had not been completely furnished at that time.

Rabbi Levi's address

Our story, on this 150th anniversary *Shabbat*, actually began in Sydney in 1845. Its hero was Moses Cohen, the nine-year-old son of the Sydney jeweller Edward Daniel Cohen, and the boy clearly remembered the birth of the Great Australian Gold Rush.

Shepherd Macgregor gave me the nugget in front of the shop to carry it in and I helped to clean it with him and father, and when he was paid for the clean gold, he gave me a shilling for helping clean it and said 'you are the first Australian white boy to carry and help clean and spend the first shilling from the first gold in Australia, dug out of the ground at Summer Hill creek near Wellington in New South Wales'.

The gold field was promptly called by the Hebrew name *Ophir*. The news spread quickly and townships around the Australian colonies were emptied of people. In retaliation and in self-protection a Gold Committee was formed in Melbourne, and on 26 July 1851 the *Melbourne Morning Herald* announced: 'Our Gold Field – Eureka. We have gold – gold in abundance!'

Some 750,000 people poured into Australia and nothing would ever be the same again.

Let's turn to the twentieth century. Many of you will remember Paul Simon, who lived opposite this *shul*. For decades a visit to the Ballarat synagogue was always preceded by afternoon tea with Jessie and Paul Simon, and, if you were very good, he would show you his glass jars of alluvial gold that had been meticulously collected as he fossicked and panned in the creeks around Ballarat. Paul Simon's life was a template of Jewish history in the twentieth century.

Born in Poland and a student of Menachem Begin, he had escaped the Holocaust by a few days. He served in the Australian Army. He loved this city and this synagogue. They reflected his wife's family heritage and the birth of the State of Israel, both of which were a precious part of his teenage years. He always hoped that the grains of gold would be made into a menorah and become part of *Beit Hanasi*, the official residence of the president of the State of Israel. Red tape prevented that happening. *Beit Hanasi* was designed to be lived in by a family. It was not a public space, and so, by default, the Ballarat menorah and his collection of coins became the focus of the museum at Sovereign Hill.

Buildings are fragile. It is the human spirit that gives life to bricks and stones and mortar – and even gold. Many of you are the children and grandchildren of men and women who were faithful members of this place. The great-granddaughter of the young man, Jacob Bernstein, who planted the pine tree in front of the synagogue, is with us today. No one could have guessed how large it would grow.

This congregation produced Nathan Spielvogel, a masterful teacher and storyteller.

It gave birth to the pioneer academic and long-time editor of the *Australian Jewish Herald*. Newman Rosenthal wrote the history of this congregation. He defiantly called it *Formula For Survival: The Saga of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation* because he knew that time would not be on the side of Jewish communal survival, separated as Ballarat is from the big city.

We know that the first Jewish religious service on the goldfields was held in 1853. Nathan Spielvogel was the regular correspondent of the Hebrew-language newspaper called *Hamagid* and because of his scholarly initiative Jews around the world knew about Ballarat. Spielvogel wrote English prose and has left us a vivid picture of the first High Holydays on the gold fields:

It is Tuesday evening, 11 October 1853, Tishri 9 5614. Clad in the red shirt and high boots of the digger the cantor who learned his *chazonos* in a far away Lemberg, solemnly and tunefully chants *Oshmanu*. The thoughts of the worshipped drift back to the homes and kindred they have left behind on the other side of the world. With bowed heads they follow his lead repeating with the *chazzan* his confession, beating their breasts as they had been taught in their distant house of worship ... a remnant of Israel, albeit a very small one, proudly remembers Kol Nidrei night.

Remnant of Israel – *Shearit Yisrael* – is the name written on the front of this building.

At the end of 1854 the diggers of Ballarat refused to pay the government's license fee, which was demanded from each miner before scratching the surface of the soil, and not after they had struck gold.

A few hundred metres from where we now sit there is a hill called Eureka and there it was that the diggers gathered in defiance of the military and raised the Eureka flag – which can still be seen at the Ballarat Art Gallery! One of the witnesses to that event became a member of the board of this congregation. His name was Hyman Levinson. He was a young watchmaker who arrived in Ballarat a few days before the troopers rode up from Melbourne to the goldfields to enforce the licensing law. Levinson has left us a personal account of what happened.

When I arrived in Ballarat I brought my tent with me from Melbourne. It took me about a week to find a suitable place for it. I selected my spot on the slope of a high hill...On Thursday morning I prepared to start business as I was cleaning the small window at the front of my tent which was a necessary feature for my watch making business when about ten o'clock Charles Dyte (who would become a president of this congregation) came running along calling out 'Hyman put up your shutters.'

‘Why?’

‘The riot’s begun.’

Nothing was to be done. I had my stock of watches in my trouser pocket. I stood and awaited developments. Presently the force came from the camp—a few hundred troopers and a number of foot soldiers. The troopers formed up in two lines ready for action. They were on the higher ground. Lying down on the ground they leveled their rifles, as it seemed to me, right in my direction. As I stood at the door of my tent, a digger came. Without saying a word to me he went past the calico door of my tent door. He took out a revolver. I said ‘Hullo mate. What are you going to do?’ ‘I am going to shoot that expletive fellow!’ pointing to captain Wise, the commander of the military.

I objected. I said: ‘There will be a volley and we will both be shot’.

He showed no sign of desisting so I called out to the troopers.

It was nearly a fatal mistake. Once the fighting was over the angry and grief stricken miners came searching for the scapegoat who had betrayed their leader. As Levinson recalls:

I tried to explain but it was useless. They were all Germans. They all attacked me. I was struck again and again. My window was smashed and my tent pulled down. I ran and they pursued me. As I ran I saw my friend Samuels at the door of his tent. He happened to know German so he stopped my pursuers and gave me time. A mile or so away a Manchester friend’s shop offered me refuge. I ran inside and hid under a stretcher. There I hid for three days. Meanwhile all my belongings at my tent were stolen.

It should be noted that in the unequal fight at the Eureka Stockade one of those 24 who was shot and killed was Teddy Thonen, a young German Jewish miner. At the cemetery you will find his name on the monument to those who fell at Eureka.

Ballarat’s first synagogue was consecrated on 12 November 1855. The wooden ark of that old synagogue stands today in the communal hall. The East Ballarat Town Council intervened and told the congregation to move. Letters flew back and forth and finally on 25 January 1861, 150 years ago, the foundation stone of the building in which we now sit was laid by Charles Dyte, president of the congregation. They had marvellous builders. Two months later this synagogue was open for business. As the *Ballarat Times* wrote:

It is our pleasing duty to record the successful completion of an edifice in which our Hebrew brethren can assemble and worship according to the faith of their forefathers. The building is sufficiently tasteful without being ostentatious and the interior is remarkable for the simplicity perfectly in keeping with the objects for which it is erected.

The evening service and the chanting of the 150th Psalm terminated the ceremony which throughout was one of great impressiveness.

There is a special dimension about this service and this celebration. To steal the words of the *Ballarat Times*, it is ‘One of great impressiveness’. It is the Australian dimension. During 150 years of peace no one has threatened this building. No one was tempted to burn it down or take it over. It is a monument to Australia. It is a proud monument to our sense of history and Jewish continuity. It is a sanctuary built around the Torah, a book of Jewish history that has shaped our society.

On this Shabbat we read from the Book of Leviticus about the treatment of disease. No one is blamed for the disease, but it is an acknowledgement that in the face of carelessness and neglect things do go wrong – personally and communally. Even synagogues will crumble and vanish if there is no one left to care for them. Synagogues need us. Synagogues need Jews and Jews need synagogues – we need a place in which Jews will get together in their unending search for God. And sometimes that is difficult.

A mother called up the stairs to her son.

‘Get up! It is time to go to *shul*.’

The son said, ‘Mum, I don’t want to go to *shul*. The people there all make fun of me. They really don’t like me. Nobody there ever listens to what I say. I’d rather stay at home in bed.’

The mother said, ‘But son, you’ve got to go’.

The son said: ‘Give me two good reasons.’

The mother replied, ‘Well for one thing, you are fifty-two years old. And for another: You are the rabbi!’

You don’t have to be a rabbi to care about *Shearith Yisrael* – a remnant of Israel. The Jews of Ballarat took their Judaism intensely. There were huge differences between the foreign-born Jews and the British-born Jews. There was the problem of decorum. At one time iron bolts were attached to the inner doors of the *shul* so that no one could leave while the Torah was chanted. Who actually owned the scrolls? The donors or the congregation? Who had the right to sit in the front of the *shul*? A charge of one shilling a week applied to the front row of the women’s gallery, sixpence for the second row and threepence for the third. Fines were applied for those who refused to be called up. In 1870 floods caused disastrous damage and there were many calls upon the congregation for assistance. *Matzot* were distributed to the needy and grants to the bereaved. And children came to *cheder* and their names were recorded and their presence appreciated.

And in 1908, inevitably, the community split in two and the secession lasted five argumentative years. But a synagogue is not just a club. It is a *kehillah k’doshah*. A sacred gathering. A *kehillah* is a gathering – always purposeful. It is *kedoshah* – sacred, holy, separate – a place to lift our spirits, to renew our souls,

to express our belief that life makes sense.

In Ballarat in 1903 a whisper of the birth of a movement, which would lead to the creation of the state of Israel only 45 years later, stirred Nathan Spielvogel. His ballad 'The Wandering Jew' was published in the *Bulletin* magazine:

But I was born in this Southland sweet
In it to manhood grown
I love this land, as I love my life
I call this land mine own.
Yet here tonight my blood runs mad,
To go with these and roam
To wander off with these gaunt grim ghosts
That ever seek a home.

And so tonight, while the gum trees sigh
I take my staff and go:
I give myself to the Wanderlust
That is both friend and foe.
Hot lava leaps in my blood tonight,
My wandering sires go by;
I hear the call of the Wandering Jew
And I must go or die.