



The story of Temple Israel, Wynberg 1955 – 2006

Helga Sandak-Lewin

The Cape Town Progressive Jewish Congregation was established in its property in Green Point in 1944 where most members were resident. After some years it became evident that facilities were needed in the Southern Suburbs to accommodate the needs of members resident in that area and further afield towards Muizenberg and beyond.

Helga Sandak-Lewin has served Cape Town Progressive Jewish Congregation as a Council member for many years, is a past Vice President of the Congregation, past Chairman of Temple Israel Wynberg Management committee, and presently serves on the Temple Israel Wynberg Council.

She is a founder member of Hadassah and served as its Chairman for ten years, relinquishing this post to act as National President of the South African Union of Temple Sisterhoods.

For many years she worked as a Religious Instruction teacher in government schools.

It was the dream of N. (Hemmy) Elyan to have a Sanctuary in the Southern Suburbs and he was persuasive in having Leon Roup, Max Cohen, Alfie Greenblo and Julius Satz to support his efforts. There were over 170 family units in Rondebosch, Newlands, Claremont and Bishopscourt Estate at that time.

At an Executive Meeting held in the board room at Temple Israel, in Green Point on 1 September 1955, the Chairman, Percy Moss-Rendell explained that the meeting would consider the question of arranging a regular service in the Southern Suburbs and a report from Hemmy Elyan, who could not be present, was read to the meeting.

Philip Halperin, who was invited to the meeting, had prior to receiving Council's authority, made enquiries as to halls available in the Southern Suburbs. The questions of personnel, location, choir, appurtenances, publicity and frequency of services were all considered at great length. Rabbi David Sherman explained that with the arrival of Rev. Isaac Richards, the project was feasible although lay-readers would still have to be used, as Rev. Richards could not be spared from his educational work for the Congregation.

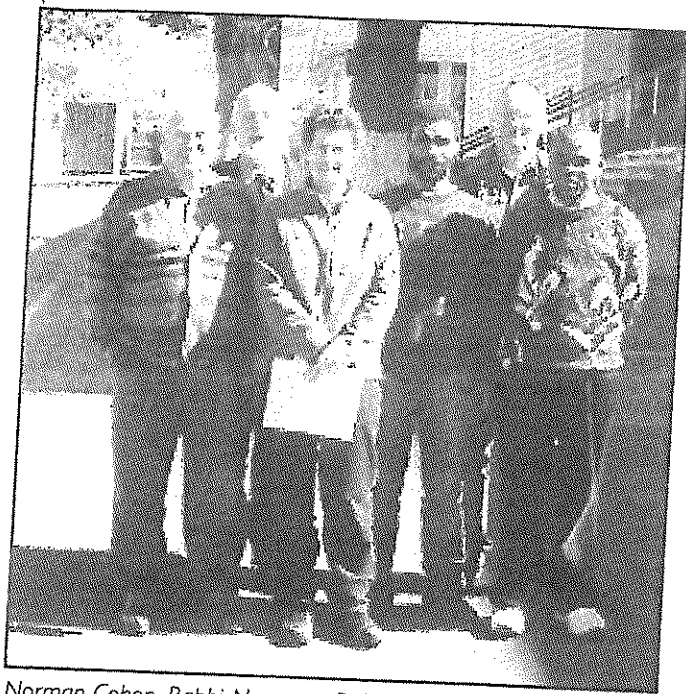
Hemmy Elyan prepared a memorandum on the subject which was considered at a Council Meeting in September 1955 when it was suggested that a meeting of members in the area be held. About 50 congregants

attended the meeting in Hotel Cecil in Newlands on 10 November 1955. Following this meeting £200 was donated anonymously towards a Torah and Capt. Reichenberg gave a further £25. Rabbi Sherman reported to Council in December 1955, and it was agreed to provide Friday evening services in the Southern Suburbs, and if possible on Saturday mornings as well. Hemmy Elyan was appointed convenor of a management committee entrusted to find suitable premises.

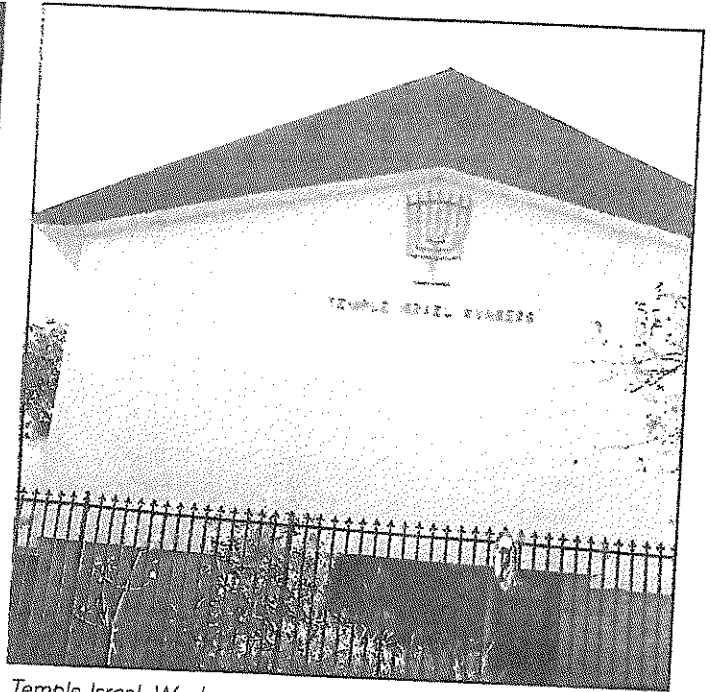
In February 1956 Rabbi Sherman and Hemmy Elyan, after having inspected various properties, settled on hiring the hall at St. Paul's Church opposite Rondebosch Fountain, which had the basic necessities, except that it had to be vacated by 7.00 pm to accommodate the Church's badminton club. There was an organ on the premises, storage space for appurtenances, parking for 50-60 cars and the rental would be five guineas per month. A letter received from Rev J.G. Weatherstone advised that the arrangement was subject to the Archbishop's approval. This was granted.

By May 1956 donations in kind had been received from P. Joffe (a portable ark), P. Goldman (candlesticks) and a Kiddush cup from the children of Mr and Mrs A.H. Kohn.

For the inaugural service held on Friday 4 May 1956, Sam Morris, N.M. Schulman and Mavis Barron offered to assist with the choir. At the first service



*Norman Cohen, Rabbi Newman, Debbie Cape,
Michael Solomons, Roger French and Clamont Twala.*



Temple Israel, Wynberg

nearly 300 people, including most of the Council members, were present.

The Council, on 22 May 1956, concluded that the venture was being well supported by Southern Suburbs members. Pamphlets were used for the first few services and thereafter Sisterhood donated 50 new prayer books for the Southern Suburbs congregants. Simon Roy, President of the Congregation, congratulated the organizers and workers for their excellent preparations.

Services continued in this vein for approximately two years but by December 1958 the need for ownership of the Congregation's own property became pressing. It was Leon Roup who came upon the property "Many Stairs" in Salisbury Road, Wynberg. It was a three-storey building with a basement, beautiful teak staircases and a large lounge/dining area combined. An anecdote from some of the older members who recall the original buildings relates to the "dumb waiter" in the house in which the children would hide and elevate themselves to the upper levels of the building!

Before a property could be purchased the Council insisted that adequate funds be raised for its acquisition. Hemmy Elyan, Julius Satz and Leon Roup were

the main fundraisers, together with Max Cohen, father of Bertha Sherman after whom the Max Cohen Hall is named.

On 17 December 1958 at a Special General Meeting of the Congregation, the resolution to purchase the property in Salisbury Road, Wynberg for £8900 was proposed by Leon Roup and seconded by Bert Fisher. It was unanimously approved. Funds were raised and the building was purchased.

In the early days after obtaining the property, services were held in the dining room/lounge of "Many Stairs". Lionel Cohen, the Congregation's architect, wished to have his son Derek be the first Barmitzvah at "Many Stairs", though Rabbi Sherman would have preferred to have had the ceremony in the Green Point Temple. However, Lionel insisted that the service be held in "Many Stairs" and Rabbi Richards "stood by his son". Lionel, who related the story to me, is now 93 years of age and Derek is 56.

Lionel Cohen informed me that he and his partners had designed a complete plan for the new buildings, but due to financial constraints it was agreed that the construction take place piecemeal as and when funds became available for further development. Whilst still making use of the original house at the front of the site, classrooms were constructed

at the rear and these were immediately put into use by the many children who attended the Cheder. In Lionel's words 'the house was still put to its full use by the Congregation who felt very much like a large family in the cosy environment'. Once the school had been completed, offices were added, including one for the Rabbi.

The next stage of the development was the construction of the minor hall (the Max Cohen Hall), near the road in front of the original house, as well as the main hall, with the house left inbetween the hall and the classrooms. Owners of the neighbouring property "Dennekamp" objected vehemently to the parking problem which could arise, and the Municipality insisted that an "escape route" for this purpose be made available at the rear of the property. This led to the acquisition of the strip of land running from the back of the property to the Main Road.

During the early 1960s it became apparent that services could be held in the halls and it was agreed to demolish "Many Stairs", whereafter the remainder of the buildings were developed to create the property as it now exists. The Ner Tamid (Eternal Light) above the Ark was donated by Hemmy Elyan in honour of his late parents and was hand-made by a congregant silversmith, Harry Felstein.

It is interesting to note that Rene Elyan, daughter of Hemmy and Lovey, married Michael Goldberg in the Minor Hall in 1965. This was the first wedding to take place in the Wynberg Temple.

The Ark in the Sanctuary was donated by Joseph Stone to honour his son Robert's barmitzvah in 1964.

In 1968 Hemmy and Lovey Elyan celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary, blessed by the now ordained Rabbi Isaac Richards in the new Sanctuary, on which occasion their daughters donated the breast plate, crown and yad for the Torah which they brought from Israel. Alfred Greenblo donated the Channukia.

During 1968-1969 the sanctuary was completed with fixed seating and carpets and six Bimah chairs were donated by Dr. Raphael Jaffe. The kitchen was completed and furnished with the necessary appliances.

In 1969 Rabbi Richards advised of his resignation, as he wished to relocate

to Durban. His position was filled by a young newly ordained Rabbi Earl Vinecour who arrived in July 1970. In the interim lay-readers managed the services. It is worthy of record that at the Kol Nidre Service in 1970 the Sanctuary, the main hall and the stage behind, were packed to capacity while many congregants were obliged to stand throughout the proceedings.

In October 1970 the Cape Hebrew Nursery School Association applied to the Congregation to use the premises as a nursery school, as they had done with the Congregation's Green Point nursery school. This was agreed to.

It was about this time that Isy Miller proposed to Council that some of its meetings be held in Wynberg and it was agreed that "proportional representation" be the criterion to decide the venue. It was therefore agreed that every third meeting would be held in Wynberg.

In 1972 the arrangement with Rabbi Vinecour was terminated and from

July of that year Rabbi Sherwood Weil assumed the pulpit. The first President of the Congregation appointed from Wynberg was Isy Miller at which time Klem Druker (also from Wynberg) was Vice-President. The core-group of Councillors representing Wynberg in the mid-1970s was Isy Miller, Alfie Greenblo, Leon Roup, Klem Druker, Mike Kovensky, Hemmy Elyan, Raymond Kornblum and Elkin Simson.

Usage of the halls had been limited, but in 1974, after discussions with owners of neighbouring properties, support was obtained for the City Council to extend the conditions pertaining to the use of the premises. This was granted and thereafter hall-hire for a wider variety of events was permitted.

What was probably the first batmitzvah in the Temple took place on 10 March 1976. Francine Gordon's participation in the service, reading Torah and Haftorah, was highly acclaimed by Council. Alfie Greenblo recommended that more girls be encouraged to follow suit, resulting in many more Batmitzvot taking place.

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Following the resignation of Rabbi Weil in March 1976 amid some turmoil in the Congregation, concern arose in Wynberg as to the conduct of the forthcoming High Holy Day services. At a Council meeting in August 1976 a memorandum was submitted by Elkin Simson voicing his regret that Council meetings were too influenced by Rabbi Sherman and that councillors were extremely concerned by Rabbi Weil's resignation. The autonomy of Wynberg was strongly recommended and following a stormy meeting Elkin Simson, Isy Miller and Mike Kovensky resigned. As a result Rabbi Sherman negotiated with and engaged Prof J.J. Gluck, a professor of Hebrew at UNISA, to conduct High Holy Day services at Wynberg and also other services while Rabbi Sherman was overseas.

Friction continued between the Congregation's two communities until April 1977, when Rabbi Meyer (Sonny) Benjamin, who was at the time employed by the Springs Congregation, wanted to come to Cape Town. He was engaged as Rabbi for Wynberg from June 1977. Rabbi Benjamin was then 57 years of age and his wife Nina was a Hebrew teacher who could teach convertees and also children at the Cheder. In 1979 Rabbi Benjamin took over as principal of the Hebrew school after the resignation of Martin Nochomowitz. Rabbi Benjamin and Nina, as well as their three children were, as a family, totally committed to the Wynberg Temple. The parents managed the Cheder, benei mitzvah classes and conversions, and the children participated fully in the choir and the youth movement as Maginim. Nina was present at all services, surrounded by a large number of her pupils where her voice resonated in the communal readings and songs.

From December 1980 Hemmy Elyan took over the conduct of services at Highlands House which he handled for over 20 years.

Rabbi Benjamin from early in the 1980s introduced to the Congregation monthly Sunday brunches at various homes with stimulating speakers and discussions. He also organized symposia on subjects such as Euthanasia, Life after Death and Socialism or Capitalism for South Africa, where speakers such as Harry Schwartz

MP, Rabbi Steinhorn, Prof M Savage and Raymond Ackerman participated.

Rabbi Benjamin's other innovations included the establishment of a roster of 40-50 congregants, a few of whom would accompany him to houses of mourning. He taught congregants to become lay-readers by inviting them to participate in readings at all his services and by holding evening classes for them. A number of these readers still conduct services today. Guest speakers were also invited to Friday evening services and all his initiatives created a great incentive for members to attend services and functions.

The "Tree-of-Life" was erected in the lobby in 1983 with 700 'leaves' for engraving to record joyous events in the lives of congregants, and the "sale" of leaves continues to be a useful source of income.

By May 1983 the question of Wynberg autonomy again reared its head. This was discussed at a number of Council meetings and was a major topic of discussion and debate until mid-1984.

An unusual episode in the history of the Wynberg Temple occurred in June 1986 when there were disastrous floods on the Cape Flats. Many indigent people became homeless and for the first time ever, certainly in the history of Cape Town, shelter was given in our premises to over 100 women and children from Crossroads, who were provided with warm clothing and provisions donated by congregants.

Rabbi Benjamin and his family sadly left for Israel on aliyah in 1988 and Cape Town born Rabbi Robert Leib took over the reins. He had joined the Congregation in August 1986 and served the Congregation together with Rabbi Arthur Seltzer, who had arrived in March 1988. Rabbi Leib left for the United States later that year and in 1989 Rabbi David Hoffman arrived. Following a stormy annual general meeting in December 1990, Rabbi Seltzer left the Congregation to be replaced eventually by Rabbi Dana Kaplan in 1994. Throughout this entire period Rabbi Sherman was always available to conduct Wynberg services and life-cycle events for congregants in the Southern Suburbs.

In May 1997 for the first time the Biennial Conference of The World Union for Progressive Judaism was held in South Africa at venues in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Wynberg Temple hosted services and dinners for the participants. This was a wonderful opportunity for meeting fellow Jews from around the world and for hearing speakers of a very high calibre. Another benefit of the Conference was to make our congregants aware of the fact that we are part of a world movement with an excellent cadre of both rabbinic and lay leaders. We believe that the Conference was voted one of the best ever by the regular international participants.

Over a weekend in July 1998 a 'retreat' was held at Devon Valley in Stellenbosch. It was organized by the Wynberg committee. David Maister, the owner of Devon Valley Guest House, offered his premises at a very favourable rate and an excellent programme of events was arranged. Friday night and Saturday morning services were held in the Stellenbosch Orthodox Synagogue. The services were well attended, not only by the visiting participants but also by people living in Stellenbosch and the surrounding country areas. The Saturday Shabbat morning service created quite a stir as it was the first time in 26 years that a morning service had been held there and to add to its difference for the 'Orthodox' locals, a female was called to the Torah!

In November 1998 the Temple Administration offices were moved from Green Point to Wynberg and a month later a farewell cocktail party was held for Werner Teichner, our stalwart shammash, office organiser and allocator of honours, who retired from his position. He had served the Congregation for many years, always displaying the best elements of a 'Yekka', kind, courteous, organised and dignified.

Security was becoming an ever pressing and important issue. We were fortunate to have new gates donated for our property in April 1999 and the security system was upgraded to ease the concerns of the committee and congregants, prior to the conference of The South African Union for Progressive Judaism in May of that year. During the conference prayer services and discussion groups were held in Wynberg as well

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as in Green Point. These conferences are always beneficial to the participants as ideas and problems are shared and friendships are forged and reinforced. The presence of a number of Rabbis creates great opportunities for the participating congregations to benefit from their input.

In 2002 Wynberg was privileged to celebrate the marriage of Rabbi Elect Malcolm Matitiani to Gillian. Malcolm was ordained through the Abraham Geiger College in Germany shortly before High Holy Days 2006.

On Friday evening 21 July 2006 we bade farewell to Rabbi Hoffman at his final shabbat service at Wynberg. For those who first welcomed him here some sixteen years ago it was, to say the least, an emotional occasion. He came to us a stranger but left us as family, a friend and an integral part of our Congregation and community. Rabbi David Hoffmann, young, tall and bushy-bearded stood before us on the bimah when he first arrived – and sang! We were not used

to that but over the years he moulded our Congregation to join in and sing with him prayers that were until then only spoken. He entered both congregational and community life with enthusiasm and we shared with him many beautiful and moving services both memorial and celebratory.

The four Hoffman children all graced our choirs both as juniors and later as young adults and Michal the eldest daughter sometimes led services reading Torah and Haftarah. The Hoffman family has left their mark on the Wynberg Congregational family.

The history of our Wynberg Temple stretches over a period of almost fifty years and after studying minutes of meetings held during that time, the human element and personal concerns and emotions of so many personalities became clearer. The committee deals regularly with issues of religious services, religion school, choir building, maintenance and security. The minutes seem dull and bland, yet having been

present at many of the meetings and discussions I can relate that often passions ran high ...

Passion, I think, is the main force maintaining our Congregation's continued existence. The passion of people who care enough about their religion, their fellow congregants and their place of worship. Passion to give of their time, energy and resources to maintain congregational structures for our current needs and those of future generations.

We have two young rabbis, Rabbi Greg Alexander and Rabbi Malcolm Matitiani now joined by Rabbi Richard Newman. Their energy, style of worship and personalities will attract more members and inspire them to join that long line of individuals who have given selflessly of their hearts, their time and their energy to ensure the ongoing history of our Temple.

Ask not what your Temple can do for you, but what you can do for your Temple!