

TEMPLE ISRAEL – The Beginning

Reform in Port Elizabeth was started about 1951/2, some years after it had been established in the larger cities such as Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and Pretoria. The man who was instrumental in all this was Rabbi Moses Weiler (of blessed memory) who came from Israel.

Reform originated in Germany in the late 1700's and became well established there during the following century. Because of the rise of Hitler and the subsequent persecution of the German Jews before the Second World War, many left that country for safer pastures. Some also managed to escape during the war, while survivors of the Holocaust left Europe afterwards. South Africa was one of the destinations of choice until, tragically, the South African government closed off immigration to these fine people.

So Rabbi Weiler arrived in this country knowing there were many Jews of German origin who only knew Reform Judaism. Most of these Jews found the Litvak-based Orthodoxy unfamiliar and, generally, unaccepting of them. It was thus relatively easy to seek out these unaffiliated Jews and establish Reform congregations.

I do not know exactly when Rabbi Weiler first came to Port Elizabeth, but it was a couple of years after my barmitzvah in the Orthodox Western Road shul so it must have been around 1950/1951. There was a great upwelling of excitement, not only among the Jews of German origin, but also among those who were not able to accept the strict laws which governed Orthodox congregations. My parents were among this latter group. So these diverse people generated meetings in houses, apartments, businesses and halls and these are among my earliest recollections of what happened in those days.

Rabbi Weiler was a dynamic person, a brilliant orator and one felt his presence as soon as he walked into a room. The only equal to this that can be brought to mind is the effect Nelson Mandela must have had when he spoke to individuals and groups after his release from Pollsmoor Prison. When the rabbi spoke, you could hear a pin drop; there was not a mutter, a cough or a movement among those he was speaking to. One walked out of a meeting he had addressed feeling that, with this man behind you, the world could be conquered. It was said at the time that only Rabbi Weiler could so successfully have established Reform in South Africa.

Within a short time many Jews had signed up as members, a committee was established and funds were being raised. While this early committee had a huge task on its hands, the enthusiasm, work ethic and attention to detail of the Jews of German origin in particular made it look relatively easy. A rabbi had to be found, prayer books obtained, premises searched for, suitable teachers for youth education signed up, a constitution needed to be worked out, agreed to and written out. These are some of the hundreds of tasks that had to be done. There was a sort of pioneering spirit among those founding members.

The first minister of the congregation was Reverend Isaac Richards, who some years later became ordained as a rabbi. He arrived from England with his wife Lily and daughter Monica. While his original rabbinical training had been in Orthodox, he had spent several years in Liberal (as Reform is called there) congregations in the UK. Being a young minister at that time, Rev. Richards was a bundle of energy and leadership which complemented the enthusiasm of the members of this new congregation.

The first premises was in a ground floor apartment in Western Road, between the King Edward Hotel and a filling station. The building was called Sandra Chambers but does not exist today, having been demolished to make way for the hotel's expansion. Some of the apartment's interior walls were demolished to create a cozy little shul, which quickly became too small to accommodate everyone - more about that a little later. We had an organ and a small choir soon after the premises were put to use. The choir was a real blessing, as unfortunately Rev Richards could not sing a note! Imagine trying to learn new tunes from someone like that; in the beginning, before the choir was established, the singing sounded a bit like the Goon Show. No disrespect intended.

For the High Holy Days and major festivals, Sandra Chambers right from the beginning was much too small. The new council used to hire the Arts Hall at the top of Western Road, the original hall on the right hand side. The second hall was only built years later. Even in those days, it soon became obvious that both these temporary premises would be too small. So a committee was established to find permanent premises in the central area of Port Elizabeth.

Membership grew steadily in those early years and there was a dynamic feeling, every time one went to a service, to hear about the most recent family to join the congregation. The majority of members were from the German Jewish community and it remained like this for many years. Of those of Litvak, Polish and Russian origin, many came from the Western Road Orthodox congregation. There were other new members who had been unaffiliated. In some instances, a family would be divided over whether to join Reform or remain Orthodox, so one spouse would remain Orthodox and the other would turn to Reform. Then there would be the situation where a Jew had married a non-Jew and only the Jewish-born would become a member.

Attendances were good for the Shabbat evening and morning services. The Friday night service would be attended mainly by adults with the Saturday morning service having mainly children and teenagers present. There was always a Judaism and cheder class during the hour before the morning service. There would always be about twenty to thirty youngsters present, and about a dozen or more adults. Teenagers in particular found Shabbat morning services a pleasure, as they participated fully and there was a good feeling created by being able to sit together and know what was going on in the service. This was new and meaningful to us.

Once the permanent shul and hall were built in Upper Dickens Street, attendance grew even more as it became obvious that the Reform congregation was now there to stay and would not be a five-year-wonder. Friday night attendances continued to grow and it was not unusual to have forty to fifty people present. One of the great things was that, right from the beginning, congregants were taught that every service would start on time and late-coming would be regarded as disruptive. Decorum was very good, with no chatter and walking around tolerated. Young

children were taken to the nursery school premises and kept busy there until it was time for the kiddush, when anything up to twenty youngsters would troop in for the blessings and the wine. One of the early draw cards for these kids was that each received a chocolate at the end of the service. I never found out which local dentist sponsored this.

A nursery school was established, with two classrooms and three qualified teachers to look after them. The school was designed to accommodate up to forty children, in accordance with the education department's requirements and was fully affiliated to the Nursery School Association. It had a good reputation, was run according to Reform teachings and many non-Reform little ones also attended. In later years, as the community dwindled, non-Jewish youngsters were admitted but it remained a Jewish nursery school until it eventually closed for financial reasons.

One of the long-lasting effects of the early spirit that started with the founding of the congregation, was the "family feeling" that newcomers and strangers passing through Port Elizabeth felt. Many a visitor would remark on this phenomenon. Permanent rabbis would talk about this and many visiting rabbis on returning would castigate their congregations, saying that Port Elizabeth could teach them a lesson. This feeling has lived on till today, though diminished by circumstance.

It is hoped that the random thoughts and memories expressed above will fill gaps in the knowledge of our early days and convey some of the spirit that existed then.

*Written by our wonderful editor of many years,
Colin Melmed*

Quotations

The more alternatives, the more difficult the choice.

Abbe' D'Allanival

The first step to getting the things you want out of life is this: Decide what you want.

Ben Stein

It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.

J.K. Rowling

A weak man has doubts before a decision, a strong man has them afterwards.

Karl Kraus

If you limit your choices only to what seems possible or reasonable, you disconnect yourself from what you truly want, and all that is left is a compromise.

Robert Fritz