

BEGINNINGS OF JEWISH REFORM MOVEMENT IN JOHANNESBURG

At the Annual General Meeting of the United Progressive Jewish Congregation in Johannesburg on the 19 March 1973, an independent Committee was proposed to determine "who founded the Progressive Movement in Johannesburg."

Such a Committee was duly appointed and at the Annual General meeting on 18 March 1974, Mr. Edgar Bernstein and Mr. Lionel Goldman submitted a Report on behalf of the Committee of Enquiry. The Committee had heard evidence from Mr. Oscar Caplan and Mrs. Yiska Schmaman. It had examined a great volume of articles, written material and facsimile documents.

The following is quoted verbatim from the Report of the Committee:

ESTABLISHED FACTS.

The verbal and documentary evidence which we examined established and corroborated the following facts: -

1. The prime inspiration for Reform taking root in Johannesburg was a lecture on its nature, principles and procedures delivered in Johannesburg on 11 September 1929 by Professor Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, Professor of Hebrew and Liturgy at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, U.S.A., while on a family visit to South Africa. As a result of the interest evinced in this lecture by a number of people, Prof. Idelsohn urged his brother, Jerry Idelson, to try to establish a group which would propagate Reform Judaism in Johannesburg.
2. During 1930 Jerry Idelson convened a meeting of interested persons who formed themselves into an informal group. The Members of this group were :
J, Idelson, O. Caplan, Dr. L.F. Freed, S. Haas, Jack Rosenberg and Mrs. Bertha Weingren.
3. On 26 June 1931 this group established "The South African Jewish Religious Union for Liberal Judaism," with Mr. M. Franks as Chairman and Mr. J. Idelson as Hon. Secretary.
4. For the following two years the JEWISH Religious Union held meetings at the homes of members, and at these meetings Jerry Idelson conducted Reform services.
5. Prof. A.Z. Idelsohn maintained contact from the U.S.A. with the Jewish Religious Union, through his brother Jerry. The Hon. Lily Montagu, one of the leaders of the world Union for Progressive Judaism, maintained contact with the Jewish Religious Union from London. Both encouraged the J.R.U. to invite a Reform Rabbi to come to Johannesburg and endeavour to establish a Reform congregation, on the basis of the J.R.U.'s preliminary work. They recommended that a call be extended to a young Rabbi, Jerome Mark, but this fell through and Hark went to Australia.
6. Towards the end of 1932 Prof. A.Z. Idelsohn interested a young graduate of the Hebrew Union College, Moses Cyrus Weiler, in the idea of going to South Africa. The Hon. Lily Montagu wrote to the Jewish Religious Union, urging them to extend an invitation to Rabbi Weiler, and assuring them that the World Union would cover his salary for a trial period of six months.
7. Correspondence between Jerry Idelson, on behalf of the Jewish Religious Union, and Rabbi Weiler followed, and the proposed arrangement was finalised.

8. Rabbi Weiler arrived in Johannesburg on 8 August 1933, and was welcomed by the leaders of the Jewish RELIGIOUS Union. On 20 August he addressed a public meeting on "The essence of Reform Judaism", and immediately thereafter took steps to establish The Johannesburg Jewish Reform Congregation. Max Franks was elected Chairman of the committee, Elias Gordon Hon. Treasurer and Jerry Idelson Hon. Secretary. From that point onwards, under the outstanding spiritual leadership of Rabbi Weiler, the congregation thus established grew from strength to strength, spreading to new constituents and growing into the United Progressive Jewish Congregation of Johannesburg of the present day.

FINDINGS.

Our enquiry did not extend to the development of the congregation, as we were asked only "to determine who founded the Progressive Movement in Johannesburg."

We believe that the evidence and documents which we had before us, and the corroboration of facts by official publications of the United Progressive Jewish Congregation of Johannesburg, provided all the data necessary to discharge our mandate, and that there is no need for this committee to hold any further meetings or call for any further evidence.

After carefully sifting all the evidence, we are impressed with a view expressed by Dr. Louis Franklin Freed, one of the original members of the Jewish Religious Union, in a letter to Mr. Oscar Caplan, dated 23 February 1973, which Mr. Caplan tabled during his evidence. Dr. Freed recalled several of the facts detailed above and then went on to state:

"The question as to who was the actual founder of the Reform Movement in Johannesburg is not an easy one to answer categorically, for we have to distinguish between such terms as founder, initiator and first Rabbi. If I am dared to make such a distinction, then I would say that A.Z. Idelsohn and his brother Jeremiah Idelson were the initiators of the Reform Movement in Johannesburg; that the committee of 1932-1933 was the founding committee; and that Rabbi Weiler was the first Rabbi. In the light of this analysis, I would say that the term "founder" would have to be construed as a composite term".

We agree with this view and are of the opinion that no single individual can be named as THE founder of Reform in Johannesburg.

(Signed) LIONEL GOLDHAN

(Signed) EDGAR BERNSTEIN

JOHANNESBURG, 1 February 1974.