

## The Cape Town Progressive Jewish Community: The Early Years (1944 – 1970)

Dr Jonathan Marks

The roots of our community are firmly entrenched in the growth in Reform Judaism<sup>1</sup>, which, while the dominant form of Jewish religious practice in North America, originated in Germany. It began as a lay-led movement, but rapidly grew into a congregational system that included many prominent and outstanding rabbinic intellectuals who combined their scholarly work with the ‘demands of the pulpit’. The early ‘reformers’ strove to create a more intellectually relevant liturgy, alongside synagogue music that had a strong choral influence. Much greater educational and religious equality was afforded to women, and the inclusion of prayer in a language other than Hebrew sought to foster inclusion among those Jews who might succumb to the forces of secularism. This is possibly the most important antecedent of the progressive movement – that is reformation was not so much anti-Orthodoxy but pro-secular. The progressive movement sought to understand and actualise religious practice within a time-bound context. A radical view of this was put forward by Samuel Holdheim (1806 – 1860) who argued that ‘the Talmud speaks with the ideology of its own time, and for that time it was right. I speak from the higher ideology of my time, and for this age I am right’.<sup>2</sup> This view, not shared by all reform intellectuals, was by no means the basis for the growth and maturing of the progressive movement. Professor Ismar Elbogen, while more a proponent of Liberal Judaism, argued that there was little to gain from shortening or changing prayers if there was an inability to awaken understanding of and enthusiasm for the service itself.

Against the backdrop of the German Reform Movement, the weight of Progressive Judaism came from its rapid growth and wide-scale adoption in North America. Four organisations emerged in the United States of America to guide and advocate for Progressive Judaism. The first of these, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) began in Cincinnati in 1873. Following the founding of the UAHC, the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion and the Central Conference of American Rabbis began before the close of the decade. The World Union of Progressive Judaism, started in 1926, focussed on developing new progressive communities around the world, including in Israel, which was evidenced by the relocation of its global head office to Jerusalem in 1974.

---

<sup>1</sup>Reform Judaism is used synonymously and interchangeably with Progressive Judaism. In many instances the ‘reform’ movement signified the reformation of Orthodox Jewish practice, and as such was seen as a progression of the manner in which some Jews wished to practice their faith.

<sup>2</sup>Source: Samuel Holdheim, *Das Ceremonialgesetz im Messiasreich* (berlin & Schwerin, 1845), 48ff., trans. in *The Rise of Reform Judaism: A Sourcebook of Its European Origins*, ed. W Gunther Plaut (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), p. 123.

An important element of the North American movement was rabbinic training. In the early 1930's, Professor Idelsohn of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, made the trip to visit his brother in Johannesburg, and through a hastily arranged public lecture, a small committee was formed to promote the idea of a reform congregation in South Africa. Upon Professor Idelsohn's return to Cincinnati, he persuaded a senior student at the College, M.C Weiler, to travel to Johannesburg and accept the post of Rabbi for this fledgling community. Based upon the success of the establishment of the Johannesburg Reform Congregation, a group in Cape Town began the process of building support for a similar congregation in the Mother City. Rabbi Weiler was initially reluctant to support this initiative based on the reputed conservatism of the Cape Town Jewish community, however a small group of Capetonians persisted and in December 1943 a meeting was held at which the procedures for establishing a congregation were discussed and agreed upon. The fledgling Cape Town community was largely lay-led, with occasional rabbinic involvement from Rabbi Weiler and his assistant, Dr Rappaport, until July 1946, when Rabbi David Sherman arrived in Cape Town from the United States of America. Rabbi Sherman's induction into the Cape Town Jewish community was in the form of a rally held the day after his arrival. This rally was in protest to the raid by the British Mandatory Government on the Jewish Agency offices in Jerusalem. Rabbi Sherman recalls that this event and the response of South African Jewry indicated to him the strong Zionist sentiment felt by the community.



Rabbi Sherman is largely credited with the development of the reform congregations in Cape Town. While he was clearly supported and aided by many lay members, Rabbi Sherman worked tirelessly to not only build this new movement, but to defend its principles from attack from within the broader Jewish community. This included a leaflet from the Board of Jewish Education warning 'good and innocent people who might be enticed by the glitter and glamour of this new fangled heresy', and public meetings conducted by the local Orthodox Chief Rabbi on the 'perils of reform'. Despite this resistance, the movement grew, to such an extent that space for worship and services became a constant challenge. The Orthodox community refused access to the Zionist Hall for High Holy Days, and this spurred the congregation to acquire their own property. Temple Israel, Green Point on the corner of Main Road and Upper Portwood Road, became the home of the Cape Town Reform Congregation. A sanctuary, hall and offices eventually replaced the house on the property, and the original ballroom (built by the previous owner for his four daughters) remained and is today still part of the facility. The Green Point Temple was dedicated in February 1952 at a ceremony that coincided with a meeting of the South African Union of Progressive Judaism.

A Hebrew School followed soon thereafter, which grew into two centres – one at the Portswood Road complex and another in the Masonic Hall in Newlands for children living in the Southern Suburbs. Interestingly, the first teacher at *cheder* was a Miss Bertha Cohen (daughter of Max Cohen), who within a few months of the school commencing married Rabbi Sherman. Bertha Sherman remains a much-loved member of the congregation today. Mrs Sherman took over as principal of the school and programming included various youth activities as well as the first youth summer camp held in Franschoek in 1950. The camps remained a popular youth activity, with subsequent camps being held in Stellenbosch, Caledon, Elgin and Pearly Beach. To the youth movement was added a Sisterhood that played (and continues to play) an integral role in the life of the community. In the early days of congregational life, the Sisterhood in many ways signalled the important role that woman play in the Reform movement, and (in the words of Rabbi Sherman) ‘... did much to change the self image of Jewish women’.



With a growing suburban community, the need emerged for a second Temple and centre to serve these congregants. In January 1959 the property known as ‘Manystairs’ in Salisbury Road, Wynberg was acquired. It consisted of a large house and garden, and was dedicated a month later. The house was used for Hebrew classes for the next two years, when a hall was subsequently added for services. The Wynberg centre was in no small way made possible by the generosity of Mr Max Cohen (Rabbi Sherman’s father-in-law) and Mr Leon Roup. The Max Cohen Hall at the Wynberg *shul* marks this contribution to our community. Reverend Richards had been appointed at Assistant Minister during 1959, and was charged with conducting Friday evening services in Wynberg. As Rev Richards was required at the Green Point school on Saturday mornings, a graduate of the Temple Hebrew School, Richard Newman, conducted the children’s services in Wynberg. Rabbi Newman is today a much-respected member of the congregation’s rabbinical team, having completed his rabbinic training through Abraham Geiger Kolleg in Berlin. In the mid-1960’s the house at Salisbury Road was demolished and a new centre including a sanctuary, office and school rooms were constructed; the Wynberg Centre was dedicated in April 1966. Reverend Isaac Richards went on sabbatical soon thereafter to complete his rabbinic ordination at Leo Baeck College in London. Rabbi Richards returned to the Wynberg congregation to officiate, before leaving some years later to take a post at the Progressive community in Durban. With Rabbi Richards’ departure, Mrs Sherman continued to teach at both Hebrew schools, until the arrival and short stay in 1970 of Rabbi Earl Vinecour, who held the

post of assistant rabbi and Director of Education. Rabbi Vinecour was succeeded by Rabbi Sherwood Weil, and subsequently, in 1977, by Rabbi Meyer Benjamin.

Throughout this period Rabbi Sherman continued to build the status and position of the Cape Town Progressive Jewish community. Rabbi Sherman battled to have our community accepted as equals within the broader Jewish community in South Africa. Attempts by the then local Orthodox Chief Rabbi – Rabbi Abrahams, to boycott all Temple facilities (such as attendance at events in the Temple Hall) largely backfired as the broader community made up their own minds and attended events and talks at the *shul*. Mrs Sherman recalls an event in 1968 in Johannesburg, when having been invited to attend the Conference of the Union of Jewish Women (in her role as President of the SA Union of Temple Sisterhoods), she was confronted by a circular letter on the notice board of the Oxford Road *shul* warning congregants from ‘fraternizing with Reform Jews’. She refused to enter the hall until the notice was removed and an apology delivered. While other incidents followed, by and large, Rabbi Sherman in his inimitable way, was a bridge builder, and worked to be inclusive, both of the Orthodox community and other religious groups in Cape Town. This desire for inclusion and acceptance took many forms, including involvement in broadcast services on SABC radio, initiation of Jewish religious study at Government schools, and active involvement in the Jewish Board of Deputies.

As the 1970’s unfolded in South Africa, amidst growing political unrest and an ever-more repressive State, the Cape Town Progressive Jewish community flourished. To come was our community’s involvement in student protest, a more active role in Israel and Zionism, and the building of bridges to a global Reform Jewish movement.