

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PERTH HEBREW CONGREGATION
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WITH GUIDANCE FROM DR DAVID MOSSENSON AO ISO AUTHOR OF "HEBREW, ISRAELITE, JEW,"
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In an article entitled "A Century of Endeavour" written by Jewish historian Dr Dave Mossenson AO ISO for the Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal, a special edition commemorating the Perth Hebrew Congregation's centenary in 1992, Dr Mossenson writes, "The story of the Perth Hebrew Congregation closely parallels the progress and evolution of Western Australian Jewry. Early in its history the congregation became the dominant Jewish institution in the state and today it remains the largest and best equipped organisation in the community. Its purpose over the years has been to maintain and advance the practice of orthodox Judaism in this remote corner of the world. Despite fluctuating social and economic conditions, and changes in the complexion of the population it serves, the congregation has pursued its primary objective consistently and effectively." For more than 123 years, the Perth Hebrew Congregation has been at the heart of the Perth Jewish community.

1892 - The Perth Hebrew Congregation is Formed

The congregation started in September 1892 to satisfy the need for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services for the handful of Jews then resident in Perth. A recent arrival in the colony, Solomon Levi Horowitz initiated an organisation adopting the title "Perth Hebrew Congregation." The foundation meeting was held on 13 November 1892. The membership mainly comprising of Jewish people of Anglo-Saxon origin, from both the Eastern states of Australia and from Britain, understandably based their adherence to traditional Judaism on the practices and style formulated by the chief rabbis of the British Commonwealth in the 19th century. The fledgling congregation made noteworthy advances during the presidency of Nathan Harris (1894-97) when regular Shabbat services were instituted and led by knowledgeable laymen and a large block of land was given to the congregation as a gift by the government, near the city in Brisbane Street.

1897 – Reverend Freedman Becomes the First Minister of the PHC

In March 1897 the Perth Hebrew Congregation (PHC) installed Reverend David Isaac Freedman as its first minister. He retained the position for the remainder of his life, serving the congregation for 42 years. During his spiritual leadership, the synagogue was built in Brisbane Street. Other officials were engaged who assisted the then Reverend David Freedman with the necessary communal halachic facilities. This included the Chevra Kadisha, supervision of kashrut, as well as agencies for the dispensation of tzedaka (charity to the needy). Reverend Freedman also set up a cheder, The Perth Hebrew School, soon after his arrival, which was attached to the PHC. When the decision had been made to recruit a minister from Britain, PHC had only 60 members. Early in the 20th century many more migrants, for various reasons, arrived in Perth. Thus the PHC had to increase its facilities to accommodate the influx, including establishing a communal hall beside the synagogue known as The Princes Hall and a school

house at the rear of the synagogue to facilitate the Perth Hebrew School, the forerunner of what is now the thriving Carmel School.

The congregation under Reverend Freedman was extremely Anglicised in nature and gave full expression to sentiments of loyalty to the British Empire. Not only did Reverend Freedman participate in all aspects of Jewish communal life, but earned great respect for his involvement in a wide and varied range of organisations throughout the wider community in which he gained executive roles.

During the First World War, Reverend Freedman was recognised with distinction for his role as a chaplain to the troops in Gallipoli, the Eastern Mediterranean and France, but while he was away for so long, the PHC's progress suffered and at the same time another organisation, the Perth Jewish Association progressed and purchased land in Palmerston Street in which it eventually erected its own synagogue. It was not until July 1918, that Reverend Freedman resumed his spiritual leadership in Perth and now assumed the title, "Rabbi", receiving the honorary title from Egyptian rabbinic authorities. After the First World War, with the resumption of shipping, there was a new wave of immigration to Perth, mainly from Eastern Europe and Palestine, which by the late 1920's boosted Western Australia's Jewish population to 2000 for the first time. During this time religious observance among Perth Jewry was overwhelmingly identified with the Perth Hebrew Congregation which had to increase synagogue space to accommodate its now ever burgeoning membership.

Yiddish speaking Eastern European Jews now assumed leadership positions in the Anglicised PHC congregation. One of the most notable to become a leader of the PHC was Mayer Breckler. The contribution of the Breckler family to the Perth Hebrew Congregation both morally and financially were extremely beneficial to not only the congregation and the community, but to causes of world Jewry.

In 1935, the PHC was blessed by being made the main beneficiary of the Seeligson Trust, established from the estate of Phineas Seeligson who was closely associated with the PHC throughout his lifetime. An annual subsidy of 400 pounds helped re-establish PHC on a firm financial footing, after the outlay necessary to expand, in order accommodate the ever-increasing membership.

1939 – Reverend Rubin-Zacks Takes Over from Rabbi Freedman

Rabbi Freedman passed away in June 1939 and was succeeded by Rev Louis Rubin-Zacks who was initially the minister of the Adelaide community. His ministry was sadly clouded by periodic ill health. Despite this, he was headmaster and teacher of the Perth Hebrew School and during World War Two saw service as a chaplain. In the meantime, the lay leadership of the congregation, also played dominant roles in the Council of Jewish Affairs, constituted in 1943. The Maccabean Youth Club utilised the Princes Hall for its activities.

A further development in the demographics of the community which was to have a profound effect on the PHC was the shift of the Jewish population from the inner city area around the

Brisbane Street Shule to further north in the new sub divisions of Mt Lawley, Coolbinia, Yokine and later Dianella. During the 1980's it went even further north to Noranda, where many Jews from South Africa settled on their arrival to Perth.

During the 1950's, the Carmel Jewish Day School was established, due to the sheer generosity of the Perth Synagogue from Seeligson Trust funds which were rightfully its own, as well as from the generosity of PHC benefactors. The establishment of the Carmel Jewish Day School lessened the role of the Perth Hebrew School at the PHC. The Carmel School later relocated to the Maccabean grounds in Dianella, making it geographically independent of the synagogue.

1965 – Rabbi Dr Coleman Takes Over from Reverend Rubin-Zacks

Rabbi Rubin-Zacks retired late in 1964 due to ill health and was succeeded in 1965 by Rabbi Dr Shalom Coleman, who initiated a higher level of acceptable orthodox practice. Rabbi Coleman, established a proper halachic infrastructure for the community, including a mikvah, a supervised communal kosher butcher, shomrim for communal functions, as well as shule services which were more in accord with halachic guidelines. Rabbi Coleman also set up, under the auspices of PHC, a Jewish academy from which many of the younger members of the community benefited both in Torah knowledge and commitment. Despite the time and effort that these reforms would have taken he still managed to represent the congregation in the wider community, holding prestigious positions in many respected organisations. This dedication to both the Jewish community and wider society earned him a CBE (Commander of the British Empire), from Her Majesty the Queen and later became an AM (Member of Australia). By far the crowning glory of his rabbinate of the Perth Hebrew Congregation was the vision and foresight in the accomplishment of having the PHC Synagogue move its site from Brisbane Street on the outskirts of the city to the then more densely Jewish populated area of Menora. Through his personal effort he managed to obtain not only permission, but a gift of land from the state government in order to accomplish this. After delays of varying sorts, the new synagogue was completed and brought into use in 1974. On its site was housed, not only the synagogue, but a Beit Midrash, a mikvah, a kosher food centre (independent of the shule), as well as the Breckler Hall. The Brisbane Street synagogue was demolished and the proceeds of the sales were added to the building fund of the Perth Synagogue at Freedman Road, Menora, the road appropriately named after its first rabbi.

Rabbi Coleman retired in 1985. He was succeeded by Rabbi Michael Orelowitz whose rabbinate was short-lived and he left after an interlude of two years. His style of rabbinate, it appeared was unsuited to the congregation.

During the 1980's, the numbers in the community were increasing rapidly. This was due to an influx of Jewish immigration from South Africa. By 1986 the unofficial estimate of the Jewish population was about 5,000, easily the largest in the community's history. Apart from the geographic location of many of the new arrivals which continued even further north to Noranda, which is approximately 7 kilometers from the Perth Synagogue, the Synagogue itself was not able to accommodate this ever increasing population and thus a new congregation was now necessary. The move to establish this led to a certain amount of animosity from some

quarters of PHC, particularly as after the departure of Rabbi Orelowitz, the PHC was in a financial crisis. It was perceived by some that the establishment of a congregation in Noranda, which would result in a number of current members of PHC of South African origin abandoning the congregation at this time, was an inappropriate act.

1988 – Rabbi Freilich Takes Over from Rabbi Dr Coleman

The appointment of PHC's first Australian born rabbi in 1988, Dovid Freilich who was formerly rabbi of the Kingsford-Maroubra Synagogue in Sydney managed to heal the ill will, which was fostered by this latest communal rift. Rabbi Freilich was willing to utilise his rabbinate for the advantage of the new Noranda congregation, despite its not being associated with the PHC. The Noranda congregation acknowledged Rabbi Freilich as "The Chief Rabbi of Western Australia," and accepted his halachic authority on the community. Rabbi Freilich was instrumental in procuring for the Noranda congregation now known as the Northern Suburbs Hebrew Congregation its first minister, Reverend Chaim Davidowitz, originally from South Africa and later minister at the Cremorne Congregation in Sydney. In order to assist the Northern Suburbs Hebrew Congregation, the Perth Hebrew Congregation helped finance the new minister in return for his also assisting Rabbi Freilich at the Perth Synagogue. This assistance was short-lived due to the fact that in a brief time Reverend Davidowitz, through his efforts had managed to transform the fledgling Northern Suburbs Congregation into an organisation which needed, through its sudden increase in membership, more of his attention.

A Chabad House congregation was also established in Noranda in 1989 soon after Rabbi Freilich's arrival at PHC. Its inaugural rabbi was Rabbi Yehoshua Landes. During his tenure as director of Chabad House, there was little association with the PHC rabbinate in halachic matters. Yet, a number of years later, with the appointment of Rabbi Levi Wolff as director of Chabad House, by Rabbi Joseph Gutnick. Rabbi Gutnick expressed publicly in the Jewish News that Rabbi Wolff was to work under the guidance of Rabbi Freilich of the PHC.

Rabbi Freilich still wanted to maintain PHC's role as the representative of orthodox Jewry in the wider community. Rabbi Freilich also focused on strengthening and professionalising the halachic infrastructures which his predecessor Rabbi Coleman had put into place. He placed great emphasis on Torah education for adults, establishing many shiurim, discussion and lecture groups for his congregation. In order to include the whole community in these educational programs, even those who were not associated with PHC, he promoted these educational activities under the umbrella of the Perth Torah Education Centre, an affiliate of PHC. Under Rabbi Freilich's influence an excellent library for the benefit of the whole community has been established at PHC, as well as through the assistance of a personal financial contribution by Rabbi and Rabbanit Freilich, a now thriving Jewish Daycare Centre for 0-6 year olds, the Ruth Landau Harp Daycare Centre. This was established with the express purpose of bringing young children and young couples to the synagogue precincts on a daily basis in order that the PHC, situated as it is with older families in the more established area, would still be utilised by the young through this facility. During this time, the Perth Hebrew School further decreased in its numbers due to the sharp increase in pupils attending Carmel School.

The rabbi also changed the more Anglo-Saxon and formal nature of PHC services as far as practicable in a big shule, to establish a more informal “shtiebel” type service to coincide with modern trends.

On reflecting the fact that Perth is no longer a one synagogue town, many of the halachic institutions are now independent or utilise the rabbinic and lay input of all of Perth’s orthodox synagogues thus adding optimism through unified strength to the future of Perth Jewry. PHC is proud to remain the pivotal institution of orthodoxy and the epicentre of the halachic framework in the community which it established over 120 years ago.