

## My Grandfather, Reverend Abraham Levy, and the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation

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### Abstract

Wise leadership and a commitment to community wellbeing characterised my grandfather, Reverend Abraham Levy of Port Elizabeth, as he was known during my childhood and early adolescence. It was on my arrival in 1989 in Australia, as a new migrant with my three children, that opportunities arose to trawl through local archives and to discover the true nature of his connections and contributions to the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation from 1910-13 and again for a short period in 1923, when he served as minister to the congregation. His eloquent sermons were widely reported in the Australian Jewish and general press, enabling me to understand more fully his vision and mission in Queensland. He was dedicated to his pastoral duties, determined to consolidate the strength of his adult community, to educate their children, and to inspire continuing allegiance of all congregants to their ancient faith. This essay traces the course of his tenure of office as minister of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation from 1910 to 1913, and again for a short period in 1923.

**Keywords:** Memoir, history, culture, religion, ethics

This essay presents an historical overview of Reverend Abraham Levy's tenure of office as Minister of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation. The research methodology is based on an exploration of primary sources and material, as well as archival and historical secondary sources. To date, there has been little research and literature focusing on this period of rabbinical leadership and congregational history in Brisbane, specifically 1910-13 and the early 1920s.

On 24 July 1989, I arrived as a new migrant in Sydney, together with my three school-age children. Little did I realise the uncanny correlation between our arrival and my late grandfather's first sermon in Australia when,

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as minister-elect of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, he took part in a service at Sydney's Great Synagogue, preaching the sermon on *erev Shabbat* 23 July 1910 and conducting a major part of the service the next day, precisely 79 years prior to our arrival to the day and possibly the hour.

Following his arrival, the *Hebrew Standard of Australasia* newspaper reported,

Particular interest centred on the participation in the service of Rev. A. Levy who, as the minister-elect of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation officiated for the first time in Australia. ... In connection with the appointment of Rev Levy, the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation may be congratulated on its choice, as the way in which he carried out the portion of the service allotted to him created an excellent impression of the earnestness of his manner, combined with his tuneful voice and the possession of other qualities attributed to him by those to whom he has been known for some time, leads to the belief that he is well fitted to carry out the manifold duties of his high office.

Seated in the offices of the Australian Jewish Historical Society in the Great Synagogue, I read this and other reports with growing excitement. As a child, I revered my late grandfather who radiated wisdom, compassion and understanding. He was beloved by his Port Elizabeth congregation in South Africa, to which he dedicated 43 years of inspired service. He played an active role in the city's institutions and, when he died, thousands of every colour and creed lined the streets in homage to a man who soared above divisions to exemplify in his work and life a concern for all humanity ("Our Jewish Ministers", 1910, 8).

So it was with great interest that I read the transcript of his first historic sermon in Australia, which focused on educating children, a theme with relevance for me as I was about to enrol my children in a Jewish day school in Sydney.

We are fortunate in being able to present to our children a religion that, while it stretches beyond the mightiest intellect, can be brought down to the conceptions of the little child. We are the inheritors of the noblest moral literature that the world has yet known, for the Bible is the greatest ethical as well as religious influence, among men.... Fortunate indeed is the child fed on this literature. The really good men that history records all received inspiration from the Bible, and it still remains the greatest single source of moral inspiration. The religious school holds up to its pupil lofty ideals; it makes the Bible characters live again in the children; it teaches faith by Abraham, obedience by Isaac, endurance by Moses, and does more to implant lofty principles than any other form of literature.... Besides the Bible, the story of the Jewish race is taught, so that from its wonderful past inspiration may be caught for a brighter future. He who possesses the youth, possesses the future.... The question of how your children may

prosper in life is secondary. Give them force of character and you give them more than a fortune; you give them something that will enable them to withstand all the storms and trials of this life (“This Week’s Sermon: The Zeal of Phineas”, 1910, 1, 4).

He predicted,

The records of Australian Judaism will tell of advanced religious instruction, when not alone the children, but also the youth shall have an enthusiasm for lofty studies, when they shall go as of old from strength to strength. Then shall the Synagogue be filled with the young men and women of our land, for in the Synagogue they will have been inspired with a love of our ancient faith—old, yet ever new. And in that day the rarest and noblest ones in our midst, carrying the banner of orthodox Judaism, shall spread the light throughout the land and shall dedicate themselves to a work that shall outlive empires and stars (“This Week’s Sermon: The Zeal of Phineas”, 1910, 4).

### **Reverend Levy’s biography up to 1910**

My grandfather, Abraham Levy, was born on 13 March 1878 in London and attended the Jews Free School in Bells Lane, Spitalfields, in the East End of London. After matriculating in 1895 through University College, London, he was admitted to Jews’ College. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from London University and Jews’ College. The *Hebrew Standard* noted,

He was very popular among his fellow students and was president and vice-president successively of Jews’ College Students’ Union. He was also vice-president of the College Literary Society. He officiated as Rabbi [Francis Lyon] Cohen’s assistant at the Aldershot camp services for some time [serving as a chaplain to the British military], and gained a wide experience in synagogue matters as honorary secretary to the Cannon Street Synagogue and the Commercial Road Talmud Torah. Mr. Levy, while still in London, proved himself an effective teacher. He was for some time superintendent of the Hebrew classes at St. Stephen’s School and then was lecturer to the Teachers Extension classes at Toynbee Hall. While at Jews’ College, Mr Levy gained in 1899 the Evelina Prize for a dissertation on Mendelssohn’s introduction to the Bible and in 1900 he was awarded the degree of associate of the College. In 1903 he went to South Africa as minister of the Durban Hebrew Congregation, to which he has since been attached and where he has made himself much esteemed and regarded in general as well as in Jewish circles (“Minister-Elect of Brisbane Hebrew Congregation”, 1910, 8).

Neither my grandfather nor my grandmother had ever visited Australia. However, they would have familiarised themselves with its Jewish history and especially that of the Jews in Queensland. Historian Morris Ochert writes,

The first record of Jewish settlement in Queensland was around the same time as the colony of Queensland separated from New South Wales in 1859. Several Jewish families left Sydney to settle in Queensland and on Sunday 5 March 1865 the first communal meeting was held to start the establishment of a formal congregation and place of Jewish worship in Brisbane. (Ochert, n.d.)

The foundation stone of the synagogue in Margaret Street, Brisbane, was laid on 7 July 1885 and the completed building was consecrated on 18 July 1886, a great achievement considering 1891-95 were years of depression in Queensland (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Brisbane Hebrew Congregation's Margaret Street Synagogue, where Reverend Abraham Levy served as minister from 1910 to 1913, and again for a short period in 1923. Source credit: Photo by Craig Franklin (Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons [Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Australia](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/au/) licence)

At the turn of the twentieth century, 23 Russian immigrant families arrived in Brisbane, many of whom were tradespeople, a community of Russian and Yiddish speaking migrants settling in South Brisbane and later forming the South Brisbane Hebrew Congregation. Suzanne Rutland notes, 'Brisbane Jewry was significantly affected by this wave of migration from Eastern Europe ... through Siberia, China, the Philippines and Fiji, their first Australian port of call being Brisbane' (Rutland 1988, 82). Rutland states that the service at the Margaret Street *shul* was 'suspected by the newcomers of laxity in Jewish observance. The newcomers also felt uncomfortable with the formal decorum of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation' (Rutland 1988, 82). Clearly, complex challenges, both socio-political and theological, awaited the young rabbinical couple.

### **Reverend Abraham Levy and his wife, Fanny, arrive in Brisbane**

The week following my grandfather's sermon in Sydney's Great Synagogue, he and his wife, Fanny, travelled on the Orient Liner *Otranto* to Pinkenba, a coastal suburb of Brisbane, where they were met on Monday, 25 July 1910 by the president of the congregation, Philip Frankel, the vice-president M. Gerson, treasurer Stuart Cohen, secretary Abraham Hertzberg, and other committee members. This delegation escorted my grandparents to the special train conveying *Otranto* passengers to the city. Their arrival was featured the next day, with photographs, in *The Brisbane Courier*, which noted, 'Rev. A. Levy (Rabbi) is a young man who comes as an accredited scholar, who numbers among his friends and contemporaries the Rev. Francis L. Cohen, Chief Rabbi of Sydney, and the Rev. J. Danglow, of St. Kilda congregation, Melbourne' ('New Jewish Rabbi', 1910, 4). My grandfather said the voyage from London had been a very pleasant one, except for monsoons in the Indian Ocean. He and his wife had received a very warm welcome from all the Jewish ministers and representatives of Hebrew congregations at Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney, the latter two congregations holding receptions in their honour. The article included a detailed *curriculum vitae*, stating he had spent the past seven years as minister to the Durban Hebrew Congregation in South Africa, where he 'brought the congregation to a proven position' ('New Jewish Rabbi', 1910, 4). While there, he was chaplain to the Natal Freemasons. The article stated, 'Rev A Levy left Durban to the general regret of all members of the Hebrew community and was warmly pressed to remain there. He was presented with addresses and testimonials before his departure' ('New Jewish Rabbi', 1910, 4).

### **Reverend Levy's rented house and budgetary concerns**

On arrival in Brisbane on 25 July 1910, the young couple rented a house in Leichhardt Street in the city, one-and-a-half kilometres from the Margaret Street Synagogue, about a 25-minute walk. Six months later, on 12 February 1911, they moved to a rented house in Stephen's Road in South Brisbane,

across the Brisbane River, about two kilometres from the Synagogue. According to historian and Brisbane resident Dr. Michael Briner, 'Rev. Levy would have had quite a walk to get to the Shul in Margaret Street over the Victoria Bridge. I would estimate it would have taken a good 40 minutes or more to walk from Stephen's Road over the Victoria Bridge and thence to the Shul in Margaret Street.... This bridge had a chequered history including being swept away in the Brisbane floods of the 1890s. In addition, it was a toll bridge from 1896-1906, so the issue of Rev. Levy having to "carry" money on Shabbos was not an issue in 1910 onwards.' Dr. Briner notes, 'There is also a "pedestrian bridge", called the "Goodwill Bridge", which joins South Brisbane to the Botanic Gardens lying at the lower end of the city proper and very near Margaret Street.' (Michael Briner, personal communication, 17 September 2024). The distance that Reverend Levy traversed every day was surely debilitating at times, given the sweltering climate in high summer and the colonial formal attire he wore—a full suit, as well as a homburg hat.

The house rental, as well as the cost of kosher meat, imposed an unrealistic financial burden on Reverend Levy, who initially earned £21 monthly, an amount later increased to £25. Nonetheless, he soon found himself struggling, a difficulty only resolved when the Congregation contributed an additional £6 monthly towards their rental, which somewhat eased Reverend Levy's budgetary burden.

### **A warm welcome and first impressions of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation**

On Saturday evening, 30 July 1910, the Board of Management of the Congregation held a reception for my grandparents at Café Eschenhagen, a fashionable restaurant in the city. The young couple met and welcomed all 120 guests. President Philip Frankel said the congregation stood in urgent need of the leadership of the new minister. My grandfather emphasised the Colonies' need of the best ministers available, and paid tribute to the good work achieved in Australia by Jews' College alumni, particularly the efforts of Rabbi Francis L. Cohen of Sydney; Rabbi Dr. Abrahams of Melbourne; Reverend D. I. Freedman, of Perth; and Reverend J. Danglow, of St. Kilda. He predicted that a new era in Australian Judaism was at hand, when the influence of Jews' College would prevail. The emotion uppermost in his mind was one of thankfulness and gratitude to the congregation for its hearty reception for his wife and himself. Prior to leaving London, Chief Rabbi Dr. Adler had impressed on him that the Jewish communities of the Colonies were more needful of a spiritual head than those at home. He had assured Dr. Adler that he would strive to excel himself in the carrying out of the duties now allotted to him ("Brisbane Hebrew Congregation. Induction of Rev. A. Levy", 1910, 3).

As a young Englishman born and bred, loyal to King and Country, he now found himself in a milieu that reflected many of these values. Jennifer Creese notes, 'Queensland's early Jewish community was staunch in their support for the British Empire and the Crown; many royal milestones and commemorations were enthusiastically honoured.... The community in Brisbane also held a big family picnic annually each Empire Day from 1905 onwards' (Creese 2016, 16). The Queensland Jewish community 'had built a thriving base of devout Jewish families in Brisbane and supported strong regional communities in the state's north and in the more populous agricultural areas. ... They had made their way into Queensland society without losing their Jewish spirit and values, and built a foundation which was there to stay' (Creese 2016, 18).

### **The Induction Service and Reverend Levy's first sermon in Brisbane**

The splendid Induction Service was held on Sunday morning, 31 July 1910. The very next day, newspapers covered the event in lengthy reports. *The Brisbane Courier* stated that the synagogue was crowded 'to its utmost capacity, among those present being members of all denominations' ("Jewish Rabbi", 1910, 5). Retiring minister, Reverend A. P. Phillips, conducted the service, which featured a choir with organ accompaniment. Reverend Phillips, President Philip Frankel, and members of the Board welcomed Reverend Levy at the door of the synagogue and the procession circled the interior of the shul three times. The two ministers, with the president and vice-president, ascended the steps of the Ark. My grandfather stood with bowed head, as the president placed a *tallit* around his shoulders as a symbol of his investiture; and Reverend Phillips then blessed him with the priestly benediction. After taking a Torah from the Ark, the procession moved to the *bimah*, where prayers for the congregation and the royal family were offered up by the retiring minister. After returning the Torah to the Ark, Frankel requested, 'We ask you to take charge of our congregation. We invite you to become our spiritual head, and in doing so, I would ask you to inaugurate your ministration by addressing your flock' ("Jewish Rabbi", 1910, 5).

My grandfather based his inaugural sermon on the *Haftarah* for that week, the first chapter of Jeremiah, emphasising the beginnings Judaism viewed as holy. He spoke of ideals he would set before them. His first aim always would be to bring the congregation nearer to God. He would aim to destroy that self-contentment which was the enemy of spiritual life. A minister must be the eternal enemy of all irreverence and disrespect for divine things, that disrespect which was the enemy of all Jewish, as well as of gentile, life. He would teach them to love their faith, to be proud of their literature, and to obtain that zeal for truth, for justice, and for the knowledge of the Lord, which had overthrown empires, annihilated idols, turned the course of history, and changed the face of the globe. To bring that about, he must tell them of the majesty of God. He pleaded for the retention of all those rites and ceremonies

and those institutions which sweetened the life of the Jews, and linked generation to generation. It would be his earnest endeavour to foster a united house of Israel, and to get them to pray, to work, to rejoice, and to hope together. There was only one God in heaven above, and there could be only one united Israel below. As Jews, they must be loyal to each other, and to others they should be liberal. At all times they should endeavour to live nearer to God, and to strengthen the brotherhood of man (“Jewish Rabbi”, 1910, 5).

He would preach no Judaism of his own making, no easy or modish Judaism, but the historical, ancestral Judaism demanded of all who professed the law which Moses had given us in eternal inheritance to all the congregation of the faithful. There was but one God in heaven and one Israel upon earth. Because he would preach but Judaism, they would find it as broad as the earth, as human as mankind—in short, the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man. At the conclusion of his address, the choir sang the Hallelujah Chorus, and the service ended with *Aleinu* and *Adon Olam* (“Jewish Rabbi”, 1910, 5).

### **Education of the youth**

Reverend Levy’s emphasis on youth and education was paramount in his ministry. On the Sabbath of 5 November 1910, he linked Noah’s nobility of character—Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation—to the education of children.

Herein lies a very broad hint to modern day parents. Would ye that your children shall be adjudged righteous? Then set the example in your own lives. The word of commendation must be spoken concerning yourselves ere it will find a place in the history of your children. But be sure that you fully understand the meaning of the term ‘righteous’. If you endeavour to foist on your children a form of religion that enlists not a sympathetic response in this 20th century, if you are unmindful of, or deliberately put from you, the sure fact that the righteous man of one generation is not the righteous man of a succeeding generation, then, according to all possible standards, you cannot be termed ‘righteous’. Noah was but righteous ‘in his generation’. The dial of religious conventionality must we see from time to time, and ever with an eye to the future.... We must be not only righteous in our generation, but righteous, just to our generation. The religious succession must be secured ere we depart (“Brisbane Hebrew Congregation”, 11 November 1910, 6).

Interestingly, he applauded the efforts of Isaac Jacobs of Melbourne to bring about a synod of Australian Jewish ministers, a project he supported.

### **‘The Jew has no missionaries, but he has a mission’**

It seems highly probable that either local condemnation of Judaism or contemporary international antisemitism affected Reverend Levy and he felt



the need to communicate his views and to fortify his flock with knowledge and understanding of these contentious issues to enable them to counter any false accusations. On 3 December 1910, his powerful and deeply felt sermon addressed Christian perceptions and criticism of Judaism as an ethnic and tribal religion without elements of a universal religion. He certainly gave his congregants theological ammunition to rebut attacks on Judaism. He stood firmly as a defender of his faith and an advocate for its universal message of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man,

Where this charge is made, the intent is of course, plain. It is to hold up Christianity as a universal religion in contradistinction to what it calls the national and tribal characters of Judaism. Judaism began as a tribal religion, but it has grown out and beyond that stage. Anyone who has at all the faintest knowledge of what the prophets of Israel contended will know that they stood for the universal character of God and the oneness of man. They need but read the chapters of Isaiah from 40 onwards, or the book of Jonah, or the book of Ruth and, if they are fair and just, they cannot but say that here is a conception of religion that is universal in its outlook; that hopes for the ultimate unity of the human family. If Isaiah had not written as he did, Jesus could not have said (he wrote nothing) what he did. Christianity is beholden to Judaism for whatever of universalism is contained in its thought. Jesus was a Jew of the Jews. There is not a saying of his for which its counterpart cannot be found in the literature of the Jews. It is about time that Christians were recognising this and were ceasing to declare that Judaism still worships the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, while Christianity worships the universal father, that Judaism appeals to racial feeling, while Christianity appeals to the universal brotherhood idea. The charge is false, unwarranted in fact and unfounded in reality. Judaism is as broad and all-inclusive as the universe.

To strengthen the charge that Judaism is not a universal religion, Christianity points to the fact that the Jew does no missionary work, that he is opposed to proselytism. A religion that has aspiration to universality, so it declares, must go out and seek to bring others to its way of thinking.... It is true that Judaism does not send out missionaries to proselytise the world, because it does not believe in propaganda of that sort. It does not believe in forcing its thought upon others. It believes that the thought of Judaism should win recruits of and by itself, that the life of the Jew should be the magnet drawing others into its fold. It does not turn the one who knocks at its door aside. It points out to him the difficulties, the hardships and sufferings involved in being a Jew, but willingly accepts the neophyte who is desirous of joining himself to the household of his own accord and for no ulterior motive or purpose.... The Jew has no missionaries, but he

has a mission. That mission is the same given to Father Abraham, that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed (“Brisbane Hebrew Congregation”, 16 December 1910, 12).

### **The coronation services in Brisbane and Toowoomba**

The coronation of King George V and Queen Mary of the United Kingdom and British Empire took place on 22 June 1911 in Westminster Abbey. That same day, my grandfather conducted a Coronation Service in the Margaret Street Synagogue. The *Hebrew Standard* quoted his words, ‘It was for them as a Jewish congregation to invoke heaven’s blessing on the King and Queen, and to pray that their continued happiness—formed in their thorough devotion to duty, and in the attachment and esteem of the people—might be a sure guarantee for the peace and prosperity, and for the greatness and glory of the Empire’ (“Brisbane News. Coronation Service”, 1911, 12). He emphasised the patriotism and loyalty of Jews to the country of their birth or adoption; and hoped that the day might not be far distant when the Eternal would reign supreme over the whole world.

### **Improved governance of the Toowoomba Hebrew Congregation**

At the invitation of the Toowoomba Hebrew Congregation, on 23 June 1911, Reverend Levy conducted the Friday evening service, followed by a Coronation Service in the Toowoomba Synagogue on Saturday afternoon, 24 June 1911, an event prompting great interest in the town and attracting many non-Jews to the service. On Saturday evening, he convened a meeting of the local Jewish residents, and discussed with them various matters pertaining to the governance of their congregation.

In a report submitted on his return to Brisbane, he noted, ‘A committee consisting of Messrs. I. Abraham, B. Bird & F. Harrison (Secretary) has been elected for the purpose of taking all steps necessary to secure a much needed improvement of the synagogue property. A subscription was raised to redeem the synagogue title-deeds, long in the possession of Mr. Hamilton, Solicitor. A promise was made me that the Synagogue would be open every sabbath for divine worship’ (report of Reverend Levy dated 11 July 1911, Brisbane Hebrew Congregation minute books). A committee was formed to carry out his recommendations. Regrettably, it seems his efforts at promoting good governance among the congregants were doomed to failure, attributable as much to lack of interest as to the consequent rapid decline of the congregation. On 12 March 1912, Reverend Levy submitted a Report to the Margaret Street Synagogue Board stating,

The Executive Committee of the Toowoomba Hebrew Congregation appears not to be a happy, united body. Friction has been engendered over the appointment of trustees. One of the members of the committee wrote asking my aid and mediation; I replied that I could not take any action until an official request was preferred. My

correspondent stated that the President of the congregation had disappeared from Toowoomba and that the secretary had refused to consider an application for a committee meeting. I presume that further enlightenment will be shortly afforded me as to the gravamen of the position. (report of Reverend Levy dated 12 March 1912, Brisbane Hebrew Congregation minute books)

While Reverend Levy's visit in 1911 and subsequent liaison with the Toowoomba congregation engendered promises of improved governance at the time, the Toowoomba Hebrew Congregation spiralled downwards rapidly, according to research conducted three decades later by Reverend J. Wolman, who notes that part of the synagogue property was sold in 1917 and the remainder in 1928 (Wolman 1941).

**'The community in Brisbane has taken a fresh lease of life'**

At the beginning of May 1911, a representative of the *Hebrew Standard* visited Brisbane and interviewed my grandfather, who by then had held the position as spiritual head of community for nine months. The reporter noted, The reverend gentleman expressed himself as being very much pleased at having come to Australia as he believed there was very good work to be done here.... Under Mr. Levy's guidance the community in Brisbane has taken a fresh lease of life and several new communal institutions have been founded so that the prospects of Judaism in that city are very bright. ("News and Views", 1911).

The paper also featured his Sabbath sermon on their front page.

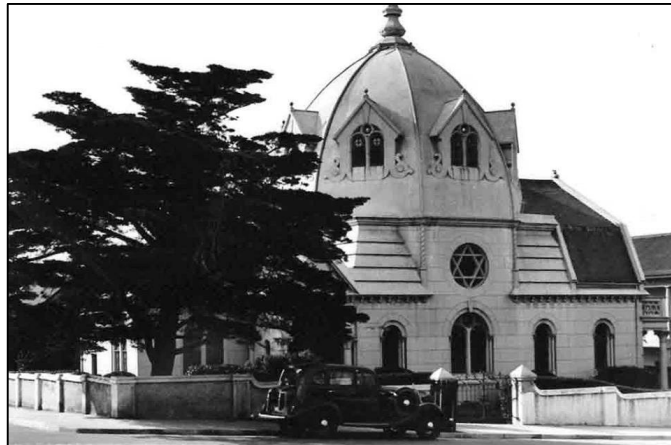


Figure 2: The Port Elizabeth Hebrew Congregation's synagogue in Western Road, where Reverend Abraham Levy served as minister for 43 years. The synagogue was demolished in March 1958. Source credit: Photographer unknown. Reproduced by permission of the Kaplan Centre / South African Jewish Museum Archives.

In June 1911, under the auspices of the Brisbane Jewish Literary and Social Society, Reverend Levy gave a lecture on Moses Mendelssohn. Abraham Hertzberg thanked him for the interesting and instructive address, and spoke enthusiastically of the good work the society was achieving in unifying scattered members of the community and in introducing new aims and aspirations (“Brisbane News. Coronation Service”, 1911, 12).

### **Reverend Levy resigns in 1913**

I recall my grandfather telling me that the climate in Brisbane affected his health and, consequently, he resigned in 1913. When he left Brisbane, my grandmother Fanny was pregnant with my father, Ronnie Levy. On the boat sailing from Australia to South Africa, he was born prematurely on 31 May 1913. He was named Bartlett after the ship’s doctor and Arunicus after the *SS Runic*, the ship on which they sailed. Despite these distinctive names, he was ‘Ronnie’ to all who knew him, derived from his Hebrew name, Aaron.

In the following years, my grandfather served as minister of the Port Elizabeth Hebrew Congregation, based at the Western Road Synagogue (see Figure 2). It was from there that he returned in 1923 to Brisbane to minister a second time to the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation. While happy memories of his tenure of office in Brisbane and the significant friendships forged undoubtedly played their part in the decision to return, an unfortunate incident in Port Elizabeth played a major part in his sudden resignation and departure. In a family memoir written in 2015, Denzil Levy, my father’s younger brother, notes his father’s reason for leaving Port Elizabeth and returning to Brisbane,

In 1923, my father resigned from the position of Spiritual Leader of the Port Elizabeth Hebrew Congregation on a matter of principle. My father, a committed and ardent Zionist, was asked to appear on the same platform and speak at a meeting to be addressed by an emissary from Palestine. Mr. Eiph [sic] Cotton, the then President and an anti-Zionist, wanted to forbid him [Reverend Levy] to speak, a constraint he found totally unacceptable. (Levy 2015, 1).

In an interview, former Port Elizabeth resident Alan Simmons cast light on Ephraim Cotton’s disposition (Alan Simmons, personal communication, 14 September 2024). Alan’s father, Leo Simmons, who was the choirmaster and treasurer in the 1920s for the Port Elizabeth Hebrew Congregation, had strong connections with the Cotton family. Two Cotton brothers had left Birmingham, England, and the elder had established a business in Port Elizabeth, known as B M Cotton. Leo Simmons was a junior shareholder and, in later years, bought the business from them. On a visit to England as a 21-year-old in 1955, Alan Simmons visited Ephraim Cotton in Birmingham, where he lived in retirement. Alan was ‘irritated’ by Ephraim’s authoritative and somewhat abrasive manner. ‘They were an upper-crust Jewish family and he was clearly accustomed to doing things their way,’ he recalled. While Reverend Levy opposed the censorship Ephraim Cotton

attempted to impose on him, it is likely that Cotton's commanding tone further alienated him.

The reasons for Reverend Levy's departure from Port Elizabeth were clearly multifactorial. On arrival in Brisbane, he stated, 'What turned my thoughts towards the city [Brisbane] again was a letter from Dr. Hertz, written from Government House in April 1921, stating that all classes remembered me with affection, and still deeply regretted my departure from Australia. This, taken in conjunction with the fact that this country offers a much finer field for my sons than South Africa, led me to seek re-appointment in Brisbane' ('Rev. A. Levy. Return to Brisbane. Impressions of South Africa', 1923). Prior to leaving Port Elizabeth, he received illuminated addresses not only from his own community but also from representative members of the city. Rabbi Joseph Hertz's letter to him from Brisbane clearly influenced Reverend Levy profoundly. At that time Dr. Hertz was Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and the first Chief Rabbi to undertake a pastoral tour of Jewish communities in the British Empire, from 1920 to 1921. He held the position of Chief Rabbi from 1913 to his death in 1946.

Reverend Levy, together with his wife Fanny and their six children, the youngest only four months old, arrived in Brisbane on Thursday morning, 17 May 1923. Many old friends were at the wharf to welcome them. Reverend and Mrs. H. L. Friedlander were there, as were the congregation's president, Philip Frankel, vice-president E. M. Myers, secretary M. Hertzberg, BALLB, president of the *Chevre Kadisha* H. Portrate, the *shammes* S. Rosen, representatives of the Young People's Hebrew Association and Jewish press, and members of the congregation. On arrival at their home, which was beautifully decorated for the occasion, 'the Rev. and Mrs. A. Levy and family were met by Mesdames P. Frankel (president, Daughters of Zion Society), D. Blumberg, (vice-president, Jewish Ladies' Guild), and N. Ravdall (committee member, Jewish Ladies' Guild), and were subsequently entertained at morning tea and lunch by Mesdames M. E. Myers, N. G. Max, M. Hertzberg, H. Portrate, H. L. Friedlander, J. Rosenberg, and A. Harris (Ladies' Jewish Guild and Daughters of Zion Society)' ('Queensland. Rev. A. Levy.' 1923).

### **Second induction of Reverend Abraham Levy on 19 May 1923 in Brisbane**

The Governor of Queensland, Sir Matthew Nathan, attended my grandfather's second induction as spiritual head of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, on Saturday morning, 19 May 1923, in the Margaret Street Synagogue. Nathan was the first Jew to be appointed a colonial governor. Hilary Rubinstein notes, 'he developed a cordial relationship with the Jewish community of Brisbane ... possibly in compensation for the political difficulties that dogged him.... Nathan worshipped regularly and punctually at the synagogue in Margaret Street. He gladly lent his support to the Zionist cause, speaking publicly in favour of Bella Pevsner, the emissary who visited

Australia in 1923'. Rubinstein adds that he was an example of 'the lofty heights to which British Jews might climb, and further proof to the Jews of Australia of their immense good fortune in living in a British land' (Rubinstein 1991, 368).

It was apparent that my grandfather was welcomed back into a community that already held him in high esteem and was appreciative of his worth. President Philip Frankel performed the induction ceremony:

Reverend sir, members of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, having given you a call to the Pastorate as their Spiritual Head in this State, it gives me very much pleasure, as their President, and on their behalf, to induct you into the office to which you have been elected. I now invest you with the Canonicals of your high office, and finally place this Talith upon your shoulders, and trust that you may long be spared to wear them with distinction to yourself, and to the Honour and Glory of our Most Holy Faith. Thus robed and inducted, let me congratulate you on your preferment, feeling sure the Congregation has made a wise choice, and I trust and feel sure you will act upon the highest ideals and precepts which your position calls for, and in due time I hope you will have the pleasure of seeing the usefulness of your ministrations crowned and blessed with the success, which I know is the dearest wish of your heart. ("Induction of Rev. A. Levy. Brisbane Hebrew Congregation's New Minister", 1923)

He then pronounced the priestly blessing. Reverend Levy expressed his pleasure at again being in the midst of his old congregants. With customary eloquence and profundity, he said,

I come here to serve. I come here to teach.... But it is not I alone who am at this hour being consecrated anew. It is you too, who are this day renewing the covenant of the fathers: it is you, too, who are this day repeating the pledge to do, to live, to serve, to learn and understand that covenant of loyalty, that spiritual bond which has given Israel the fortitude, the strength, to face bravely through the centuries, the furies of human hatred and prejudices of darkened minds—but to emerge victorious despite all. When we stop to consider the history of our people, when we review the picturesque diversity of our past, the rise of the people of Israel out of tribal independence into a united nation, into the priesthood of the Universal God, and into the prophetic missionaries to the world, when we think of the courage of conviction, of the obstinacy in perseverance, of the pride in persistence, we, the most recent representatives of the ancient people, must marvel in pride and admiration. Whence came the strength? Whence the power? What the secret of the resistance? What the secret of the continuity of the small and numerically insignificant group in the face of so tremendous an opposition, so severe a persecution and so much adversity?

Consider it carefully and you will find that it was the force of an ideal that stimulated us.... It was the ideal of the Torah, which the Jew endeavoured to live. It was the Torah's unsurpassed teachings, its towering morality, its sublime messages, that have together formed the life-giving, life-preserving principle of the Jew. It was a veritable tree of life to him because he clung to it on his march through the ages...

Oh that we, you and I and our brethren everywhere, might realise the full import of Moses' admonition: 'This is not a vain thing unto you; it is your very life, and by it will you prolong your life upon the land'. Oh, that at this day of renewal of consecration, at this covenant hour, in this consecrated house, we realise highly and firmly that the sacrifice and the past shall not have been made in vain, that the loyalty of the fathers find renewed expression in the hearts and lives of their descendants, that the zeal of the past be the inspiring, influence in our lives in the present, and in the lives of our children, who are the future. ("Induction of Rev. A. Levy. Brisbane Hebrew Congregation's New Minister", 1923)

#### **Reverend Levy's resignation nine weeks later**

It was, by all accounts, a memorable sermon and service. So it must have come as a great shock to the community when Reverend Levy resigned nine weeks later. At first, I could not find any reference to the reason for his decision to return to South Africa so urgently. Clearly, it was a well-considered decision that did not alienate his congregants, as evidenced in the large number of well-wishers who bade them farewell ("Queensland. Minister Departs", 1923). It had been, however, an unexpected and sudden decision. This emerges from sentiments my grandfather expressed earlier, in July 1923, when the Young People's Hebrew Association held a social and dance at the Wattle Café in the city to welcome him. At that time, there were no indications at all of any difficulties or problems that might have proved challenging during his brief tenure of office. On that occasion the president of the YPHA, Mr. O. Samuels, expressed the hope that his stay in Brisbane would be a long and happy one for himself and family; and that Reverend Levy would do his utmost to support the association. The *Hebrew Standard* reported that Reverend A. Levy was moved by the warm welcome and pleased at the sight of such a large gathering. He said that a true Jewish sentiment had been shown in the welcome he received from his old and new friends, and he was pleased that the president and members of the Young People's Hebrew Association, the future generation, welcomed him in such a splendid manner. His aim while working for the community would be to unfold to them the great light of Judaism, as the Jewish youth is the only security for the Jewish future. *Shul* board member Abraham Hertzberg, in endorsing Reverend Levy's remarks, said he was most interested to hear what he said, and he was quite sure that

Reverend Levy has not lost his old punch—in fact, he has gained more experience during his 10 years' absence. He hoped that what Reverend Levy said would be of great benefit to the members of the association and community generally, who must support the young members, as they would be powerless without the assistance of those present ("Queensland. Young People's Hebrew Association. Welcome to Rev. A. Levy." 1923).

There was a significant revelation concerning the resignation of Reverend Levy, when the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation held its AGM on 26 August 1923 in the synagogue chambers in Margaret Street in the city. President Philip Frankel said the past year had been 'a very strenuous time',

As outlined in my previous annual report [1922], the most important task we had set before us was the appointment of a new minister to the congregation. You were informed on that occasion that negotiations were opened with the Rev. Levy, who was then in Sydney, but as he had accepted a position in South Africa, he was not able to entertain our offer.... Early, in September 1922, I received a cable from Rev. A. Levy, which was subsequently confirmed by letter stating that he was prepared to receive a call. Your Board was called together to consider the matter, and they decided to convene a meeting of the congregation, which was held on February 4<sup>th</sup> [1923], and after full deliberation it was decided to 'give' a 'call' to the Rev. A. Levy, which was done by cable and accepted, and in due course Mr Levy arrived in Brisbane, but after only nine weeks ministration, owing to domestic and family reasons, he decided to resign, and the congregation perforce simply accepted the resignation with regret, and the reverend gentleman left Brisbane on Tuesday, July 31<sup>st</sup> [1923]. ("Queensland. Special to 'The Hebrew Standard'. Brisbane Hebrew Congregation. Annual Meeting", 1923)

The key to unravelling the mystery of my grandfather's sudden resignation lies clearly in the President's phrase 'owing to domestic and family reasons'. Whether these were health concerns associated with family members living in Durban or London or, indeed, his own health or that of his immediate family, is uncertain. They returned to South Africa, where the family once again established itself. Initially, my grandfather took up a position as spiritual leader of the East London Hebrew Congregation in the Eastern Cape, ministering to their community for two years. He was held in high esteem and, whenever, in later years, he visited East London, his former congregants were eager to see him again. Four years later, my grandmother, Fanny, aged 45, died of tuberculosis.

### **Pastoral duties and civic activities in Brisbane**

On his arrival in Brisbane in 1910, Reverend Levy had initiated two important organisations, the Jewish Social and Literary Association, which proved immensely popular; and a confirmation class for girls above the age of 13,



which enfranchised the young girls of the community and encouraged their pursuit of Jewish studies. He noted that the girls ‘display rare zeal and application in the religious and historical study necessary for the Confirmation’ (report of Reverend Levy dated 8 November 1910, Brisbane Hebrew Congregation minute books). He also encouraged the formation of a Jewish Ladies’ Guild, focusing on charity and the welfare of the synagogue; and in 1912 he formed the Jewish Philanthropic Society, which he observed would ‘relieve the considerable strain upon the slender finances of the Women’s Guild’ (report of Reverend Levy dated 8 October 1912, Brisbane Hebrew Congregation minute books). An examination of Reverend Levy’s pastoral work in Brisbane reveals his commitment to visiting the sick at a large number of hospitals, as well as his continuous ministrations for those incarcerated in prisons and asylums and his efforts on their behalf. He visited patients in hospitals in and around Brisbane, including the Pymont Private Hospital, the Alexandra Nursing Home, St Helen’s Hospital, the Diamantina Hospital, the General Hospital and Mater Hospital; and visited Jewish prisoners in the St. Helena Prison, interceding on their behalf with the prison governor on a variety of issues, such as remission of sentences, as well as securing prayer books, bibles and special food for them for Passover. He visited three Jewish prisoners regularly—Charles Judah, Richard Purches and Ernest Cohen—liaising with the Under-Secretary of Home Affairs on Judah’s behalf and improving their lives generally in whichever way he could.

Reverend Levy extended a warm welcome to an influx of Russian migrants to the city and assisted them in a range of matters. He enjoyed a cordial relationship with them, and they relied on his knowledge and trusted his judgement. He noted, ‘Disputes that, under ordinary circumstances, would be referred to the civil court, are brought to me for adjudication, and I am amply repaid for my exertions by the very ready acquiescence in my judgment by the parties concerned’ (report of Reverend Levy dated 12 March 1912, Brisbane Hebrew Congregation minute books). In a report he submitted on 14 May 1912 to the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, he stated, ‘the committee of the Russian Jewish Aid Society has approached me with the request for an advanced Hebrew class for the children of their members.... I shall, provided the Synagogue Committee has no objections, be pleased to accede to their desire’ (report of Reverend Levy dated 14 March 1912, Brisbane Hebrew Congregation minute books). He responded warmly to this particular request, as he was impressed with the Russian community’s religiosity and also hoped many of them might join his congregation, a hope that did not materialise.

Soon after Reverend Levy’s arrival in Brisbane, it became clear he wished to create constructive connections with the gentile community, as he believed strongly in the value of civic and interfaith relationships. In 1911, he was elected to the Council of Public Morality for Brisbane and neighbourhood, which he viewed as a type of vigilance committee to improve public morals, as there was a degree of ‘juvenile depravity’ in the city. He

attended meetings of the city's educational and civic organisations, such as the Brisbane Mutual Aid Society, was elected to the executive committee of the Charity Organisation Society, and accepted invitations to public functions and meetings, such as the Jubilee Conference of the Queensland Congregational Union. He delivered an address to the Progressive Christian Association, attended meetings of Subscribers to the General Hospital and attended the Induction Ceremony of the new minister of the Ann St. Presbyterian Church, Reverend James Cosh. He became a patron of the Queensland Eisteddfod and, on 5 March 1911 at Government House, had lunch with the Governor, Sir William MacGregor. He was well regarded among the gentile population of the city as a representative of Brisbane Jewry. In diverse ways, he consolidated goodwill among a broad range of educational, cultural, interfaith, charitable and government institutions and organisations. On 29 August 1912, for example, he delivered a lecture in the School of Arts Hall on the subject "Why I am a Jew". 'The lecture, judging by the letters that have since reached me, aroused great interest, and even enthusiasm,' Reverend Levy noted in his report to the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation (report of Reverend Levy dated 10 September 1912, Brisbane Hebrew Congregation minute books). All these activities were conducted over and above his primary and manifold religious duties, including preparing sermons, conducting services and teaching. It is interesting to note that he also performed circumcisions.

### **The Greyshirt Case**

My grandfather's former congregants and contacts in Brisbane would have read with great interest reports in 1934 in the Australian press of the landmark Greyshirt case, *Levy v Von Moltke*, in which Reverend Levy sued for defamation the leaders of the Greyshirt movement in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The reports highlighted the judgment delivered in the Grahamstown Supreme Court, South Africa. Reverend Levy had courageously sued for defamation members of the Nazi Greyshirts, who alleged they had obtained from his synagogue in Western Road a document that blasphemed Christianity and revealed a Jewish conspiracy. The document was a local adaptation of the content and style of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious antisemitic forgery. The Greyshirts aimed most of their propaganda at Jews as a 'race', thereby libelling all Jews, not just Reverend Levy. Dr. Nahum Sokolow, President of the World Zionist Organisation, who happened to be in South Africa at the time of the trial, appeared as a witness in court, as did other distinguished experts who gave evidence for the plaintiff. Sokolow's evidence definitively refuted allegations of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. The Greyshirts had asserted the *Protocols* was promulgated at the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. Sokolow, who attended the Congress—and took considerable part in organising it—was able to provide evidence that this was

false (“Overseas Items. Anti-Semites Found Guilty of Forgery. Rev. Levy and the Grey Shirts. Documents Held to Be False”, 1934).

The 1934 judgement, handed down on 21 August 1934, completely vindicated my grandfather and, for the first time in a court of law anywhere in the world, the *Protocols* were declared a forgery. Justice Graham concluded that from the internal evidence of the document, it was a palpable forgery (Sarzin 2017, ix).

According to Reverend Levy’s great-granddaughter (my daughter), Dr. Lisa Sarzin, who wrote her PhD thesis on this court case,

At its core, the Greyshirt case was about distinguishing truth from lie in public discourse. Consequently, the main audience for the South African Jewish community was the broader public—a sphere in which judgments are made and actions are taken that shape society. Reverend Levy sought to prove to the wider South African public that the Greyshirts had lied about Jews and Judaism, the *Protocols* was a fabrication and that Greyshirt methods involved conspiracy, lies and fabrication. The trial process and the legal judgment provided an effective mechanism for achieving this goal.... The Greyshirt trial frames so much of the broader social debate regarding hate speech that has characterised the decades that have followed it, including vexed questions about appropriate legal and social responses to group libel. (Sarzin 2017, ix)

### **Reverend Levy’s life—religious, pastoral, and civic—in Port Elizabeth**

Although profoundly devoted to and involved in the religious life of his community, Reverend Levy was identified with a multitude of civic institutions and organisations in Port Elizabeth during his 43 years as Minister of the Port Elizabeth Hebrew Congregation, in some instances serving in an official capacity on individual boards and committees for more than two decades. He served as chairman of the Port Elizabeth Public Library, Port Elizabeth Museum Board and Snake Park committee, the Port Elizabeth Community Chest Budget Committee, the Port Elizabeth and District School Board and its Education Committee, Grey High School Committee, Port Elizabeth Naturalist Society, Port Elizabeth Eisteddfod Committee, Trustee of the Port Elizabeth Astronomical Society, the Port Elizabeth Chess Club, and as vice-chairman and honorary treasurer of the Port Elizabeth Welfare Society. Through his lectures and his invitations to the gentile community to attend synagogue services, he fostered a greater understanding of Judaism among the general population in the city. In 1935, King George V awarded him a Silver Jubilee Medal, citing his meritorious civic work in the city.<sup>38</sup> In recognition of his work fostering education in the black townships of Port Elizabeth, the local community in Schauderville named a school in his honour, the Abraham Levy Primary School, which is still today a thriving educational institution. I have a vivid memory from my childhood of seeing

several black principals from the townships arriving in the evening for meetings at Synagogue House with my grandfather, who provided ongoing educational support and guidance.

Reverend Levy retired in 1955 aged 77, and died two years later on 12 May 1957. On 14 May 1957, his lifelong friend and former mayor of Port Elizabeth, Adolph Schauder, delivered the funeral eulogy from the *bimah* of the Western Road Synagogue, where his casket was placed before the Ark. Family members and the heads of Jewish institutions were present. 'He played a living part in the history of the Jewish people of this city and of South Africa, He dies a man loved and respected by all, young and old, Black and White, Jew and non-Jew,' Schauder said. 'From his heart came the spirit of benevolent help to penniless newcomers, whose children and grandchildren are part of our community today.... He was a fine Jew, a scholar and a gentleman' (Levy 2015, 40).

Schauder alluded to the Greyshtet case, 'in that hour when the Greyshtet libel put us in the forefront of mankind's struggle against evil, this was the man who did not weaken nor fail. A man of peace, hating quarrels, he nevertheless became our champion in a fight which ultimately vindicated the Jewish name and won a victory for humanity everywhere.' He concluded, 'To us, Rev. Levy was not only a leader, but also a teacher. He deeply respected his heritage of orthodox religion, whilst recognising its setting in the Western world of our times. But most of all, in a world gone mad with materialism, he held fast to spiritual values, and shared them with us in sermons never to be forgotten' (Levy 2015, 40).

A further service was held later that day in the Port Elizabeth Glendinningvale Synagogue, where the coffin was placed before the Ark for a service attended by a capacity crowd paying tribute to him for his 42 years of service to the community. Traffic police riding before the hearse escorted the cortege to the North End Cemetery. Jewish businesses closed their doors in his honour. At his tombstone consecration conducted sometime later, Leo Simmons, the President of the Port Elizabeth Hebrew Congregation at that time, delivered a touching eulogy (Alan Simmons, personal communication, 14 September 2024).

I have lived in Australia now for more than three decades. My two daughters live in Sydney and Melbourne respectively with their families. My son lives in Jerusalem with his family. When I first researched my grandfather's connections to the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, the stories were immensely comforting. They fostered a real sense of belonging in our new country. The chronicle of his sermons enabled me to appreciate again the wisdom, insights and eloquence, allied to his compassion and innate humanity, with which he enriched the lives of others. It engendered pride in his achievements. His life also mirrored the society of his time and the issues with which he was preoccupied and which featured in his weekly sermons.

When he left Brisbane for the first time in 1913, President Philip Frankel said that although he had been in their midst for only three years, his efforts in the cause of charity, his ‘ennobling and inspiring addresses given from his pulpit would long live in their memories and be imprinted on their minds to make them all better men and women’ (“Brisbane News. Farewell to Rev M. Levy”, 1913). One cannot ask for a more meaningful legacy.

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