

STRIKE ME LUCKY!—Judaism in Australia

By Rabbi John S Levi

The house lights darken. The orchestra strikes up the Yiddish wedding song '*Choson kalah-mazal tov*'—'Best wishes to the bride and groom'—and into the spotlight prances a disreputable looking man whose black stage make-up is a grotesque caricature of a Jewish face. Roy Rene Mo' McCackie splutters his way through his script with blue jokes, miserly jokes, smelly jokes, jokes against snobbery and the upper educated class. Mo' is the outsider. He has *schlimmazel*—bad luck. It is a Yiddish word that has become part of Australian slang. Nothing ever goes right. His best mates are the all-Australian 'Bluey' and 'Spencer the Garbage Man!' Mo' has *chutzpah* and tenacity. He cocks his snoot at every pommy bastard. The worse the Great Depression becomes, the more popular Roy Rene becomes. He is a part of a national myth. He is the essence of Australia—and yet he is the parody of the Jew.

At the same time, in Central Europe, merciless, unfunny cartoons of Jews who look as ugly as Mo' are the stock in trade of Julius Streicher's infamous journal the *Stürmer*. In Germany that parody becomes the prelude to a nightmare; in Australia it is an uneasy tribute to the existence of a little understood community that will not go away.

It is a cliché to say that Jews have brought blessing to Australia. Year after year the *Business Review Weekly* publishes its 'rich list' in which Jews constitute about one third of the fortunate few. Yet, paradoxically, Jews constitute one half of one per cent of the population. The University of Melbourne tabulates the top schools in terms of their pupils' score in final secondary exam results. In 1996, the first five Victorian schools are all Jewish day schools; the sixth is Melbourne High School whose student body divides its honours between Asian Australians and Jews. Lucky indeed! Fortuitous, lucky, or meaningful?

The Australian historical experience that followed the European settlement of the continent has all taken place after the American and French revolutions. One of the results of this new age that proclaimed the rights of humanity was the definition of national identity by culture, rather than religion. As Ninian Smart observes,

Napoleon could assemble a Sanhedrin or Jewish Assembly and ask its members whether they truly regarded themselves as French citizens. Of course they did. This was a major beginning in the prising apart of religion from civic ideology.¹

It was because of this process that political emancipation came to the Jews (and Roman Catholics) of Australia early and comparatively easily. As the Jews of the new colony of Victoria—who petitioned their Legislative Assembly for equal treatment with other citizens—declared, they wanted 'neither toleration nor favour'. They wanted justice and equality, and they got it. In return for emancipation, Australia has gained an extra dimension of cultural and religious diversity that has had profound consequences.

In 1930, Australia's Labor prime minister wished to make it clear that the post of governor general of Australia is not part of the royal grace and favour system—which honours superannuated British generals and chronically inebriated royal cousins. Scullin cast around for an Australian candidate who was clearly beyond reproach. To the profound discomfiture of King George, Jim (JH) Scullin and his cabinet chose the chief justice of the High Court of

Australia, Sir Isaac Isaacs. As Sir Zelman Cowen reminds us in his biography of Sir Isaac, the Australian cabinet actually had two candidates before them. One was Sir Isaac Isaacs; the other was Sir John Monash. When Scullin pre-empted the customary procedure of leaving the announcement of the appointment to Buckingham Palace, the leader of the Australian opposition denounced the prime minister for 'his strident and narrow jingoism'. Scullin responded: 'What kind of an Australian is Mr Latham when even the rumour that an Australian citizen may be chosen as the King's representative puts him to a frenzy?'.²

Even more remarkable in this story of good fortune and luck is the character and career of the other candidate considered by the cabinet for the vice-regal post. Sir John Monash was the nephew of Heinrich Graetz, the great nineteenth century historian of the Jews; and the grandson of a printer of Hebrew books in Krotoshin. That he was Australia's most illustrious military commander and civil engineer is known to us all, but, in terms of Australian and Jewish history, one of the most remarkable events in Monash's career occurred in 1929. This story is told by the historian Geoffrey Serle in his remarkable biographical study.³

We need to remember that in Europe at this time, the odour of fascism poisoned the streets, and the National Socialists had begun to sense that their hour was near. At the end of 1930, the *Bulletin*, whose history of racist rat-baggery can be neither forgotten nor forgiven, published a letter that began in the following way:

There is really only one man who can save Australia and that is John Monash. Let the remnants of the Old Brigade rally around him and give him a council of financial experts. Put Australia under semi-military rule. Form concentration camps for the starving women and children...

Monash was asked to become the military dictator of Australia. He responded:

What do you and your friends want me to do? To lead a movement to upset the Constitution, oust the jurisdiction of parliament and usurp governmental power? If so, I have no ambition to embark on High Treason, which any such action would amount to ... Depend upon it, the only hope for Australia is the ballot box and an educated electorate.⁴

As I have already taken you down the path of prominent Jewish Australians, mention must be made of Sir Isaac's biographer—who was the second Jewish governor general and former vice-chancellor of the University of Queensland. More than any other individual, Sir Zelman Cowen was able to bring healing to a bruised and apprehensive nation, and may have saved us from a constitutional civil war.

Who was more fortunate?

Who had more *mazel*?

Were Isaacs, Monash and Cowen, and the moral philosopher Professor Samuel Alexander and the distinguished Jewish historian Joseph Jacobs, lucky to have grown up in Australia? What may we say about Professor Michael Stone, who is in charge of the Hebrew University's Orion Institute that oversees the 50 000 fragments of parchment that constitute the Dead Sea scrolls? Was Australia lucky to have been the birthplace of these notable Jewish men? Has Australia been good for the Jews, and is there something within Judaism that creates the conditions for a synergistic combination that is far greater than the power of its separate components?

We will search for the answer to this secret in the course of this lecture. In doing so, I want to avoid dealing with famous (or with infamous) individual Australian Jews, or even with the course of Australian Jewish history; rather I will attempt to address the question of the nexus between Australia and Australian Jewish religious identity and ideology.

Everyone secretly believes that they live in the most significant period of all time. However, in terms of Jewish history, there is a very good case to be made out for this extremely self-centred proposition. In the many centuries of Jewish existence, none has been as tumultuous and so filled with such radical change as the twentieth century. The past hundred years have seen the most cataclysmic events in the course of Jewish history. The changes are comparable to the momentous years ushered in by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans, and the subsequent development of Rabbinic Judaism.

And it happened so quickly! In August 1897, in Basel, Switzerland, the Austro-Hungarian journalist Theodor Herzl managed to convene the first Zionist congress. He had heard the crowds denounce Dreyfus and call for his death, and he knew that anti-Semitism would not just go away. The Jewish world was in the process of dramatic change—but nobody, in their wildest dreams or nightmares, could imagine what the next hundred years would bring.

In Vienna, on 3 September 1897, immediately after the congress, Herzl wrote in his diary:

Were I to sum up the Basel Congress in a word which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly—it would be this: At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said that out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, and certainly fifty, everyone will know it.⁵

As though on cue, on 15 May 1948—in the hall of the Tel Aviv Museum—Herzl's dream came true: the State of Israel was proclaimed. David Ben Gurion read the proclamation of independence in the reborn language of Hebrew. One third of the Jewish people had perished in the *Shoah*; among the victims were more than one million Jewish children. On the way to the 'final solution', a whole world of Yiddish language and culture was annihilated, and the demography of the Jewish world was severely damaged.

The largest Jewish community is no longer in Eastern Europe—it is to be found in North America. A remnant is left in Europe and Russia. The Jews of Asia and North Africa have all moved to Israel where more than five million Jews now live. Despite Israel's six wars in fifty years, its unresolved peace process, its unresolved ideological civil war about religion, and its struggle to find its place in the world, Israel has nevertheless inspired the Jewish people. The rebirth of a Hebrew-speaking Jewish state has fostered a revival of Jewish life, religion and culture around the world. By the year 2000 there will be six million Jews in Israel—a statistic fraught with significance. Only in the world of the spirit has there been an ongoing crisis.

Today, 85 per cent of the Israeli Jews would classify themselves as 'secular'. They speak Hebrew. They learn the Hebrew Bible as we learn Shakespeare—but they observe the festivals by making for the beach or for the airport. Somehow or other, Australian Jews have to find some nexus between their own vision of Jewish identity and this new robust intellectual and spiritual environment.

Professor WD Rubinstein introduces his anthology of essays, *Jews in the sixth continent*, by asking whether other Australian ethnic minorities can derive a lesson from the Australian

Jewish experience. He answers with a tentative 'No', and grants it is possible that other communities may 'have been subject to many of the same pressures and constraints, although Jewish history is almost always "*sui generis*".⁶

And so it is. Jews live within a multi-faceted and contradictory world community. The Harvard professor, Alan M Dershowitz, explains the condition of modern Jewish existence by telling the old story of the isolated Polish *shetl* that decides, in the 1920s, to send a villager to America to observe Jewish life and to report back. The traveller returns filled with enthusiasm.

'I met a Jew in New York who had mastered the entire Talmud by the time he was to be Barmitzvah. I met a young Jewish radical who by the age of 21 was the leader of the Jewish Labor League of New York. I met a Jewish man who, by the age of thirty, owned a dozen apartment buildings. I met a Jewish man who was married to a glamorous film star in Hollywood.'

The mayor of the little town stops him in full flight. 'We know it is not surprising that you met such Jews in America. After all we know that millions of Jews have gone to live there.'

'But you don't understand', replies the traveller, 'I was talking about the same one Jew'.⁷

The former foreign minister of Israel, Abba Eban, describes the contemporary Jewish world as 'a complex diversity'. I would use the same phrase to describe the Jews of Australia of whom there are perhaps 90 000 to 100 000. The Jewish community is a small, busy, vital, eclectic, argumentative group of people and organisations that range across the ideological spectrum—from primitive fundamentalists in the villages of the Carpathian Mountains to free thinking secularists. This rainbow of identity has to include Jews who are frightened of their own shadow and who quietly 'pass' as gentiles, to young barristers whose beards and yarmulkes proclaim their orthodoxy. It must include the young Jews demonstrating against the National Action headquarters in the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick and those who sit in a synagogue in St Kilda.

No wonder Jews wince when they hear someone speaking of 'a Jewish church'. Jews may also deny that they are religious, but yet go to endless trouble to take the Day of Atonement off from work, or visit the local synagogue in Bangkok or Bombay when they are travelling far from home. Judaism is neither a religion nor a faith—its origins precedes these very western categories. It is a coat of many colours. It is a sense of extended family or peoplehood. As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote, 'Judaism is a civilisation that transcends its religious origins'.

Alan Dershowitz writes of 'the trickle-down theory of Jewish success' and he explains that the

great paradox of Jewish life is that virtually all the positive values we identify with Jews—compassion, creativity, contribution to the world at large, charity, a quest for education—seem more characteristic of Jews who are closer to the secular end of the Jewish continuum than to the ultra orthodox end. Put another way, the closer one lives to the religious core of Judaism, the further one is likely to be from the Jewish values so many of us cherish most...There seems to be a delicate balance. Too close to the core creates insularity and parochialism; too far from the core dissipates the Jewish values.⁸

Dershowitz observes that there is one possible explanation for this paradox. Both ultra-orthodox Jews, and the completely alienated, secular Jews, live in only one world. The concept of otherness is a consistent, classical biblical theme; in today's world, this tension—which has been so creative—is missing. Moses confronts the pharaoh and challenges his supreme power by

telling him that there is a higher authority. Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman. Amos preaches about justice at Beth El and defies the priest Amaziah. Nathan speaks the truth to King David regardless of the consequences. Jews may not conform.

Where did the ideologies of the monsters Stalin and Hitler ultimately converge? Neither could tolerate a Jewish community in their midst. They knew their Jews would never submit.

What am I to tell you about Judaism in this most remote, most urbanised and secular of all continents?

In that fateful year 1933, there were fewer than 25000 Jews in Australia—10305 in Sydney and 9500 in Melbourne (and 1041 in Queensland). One third of the Jewish males were married to non-Jews. These 25 000 people constituted the largest non-Christian minority in the country⁹—if we exclude the indigenous community who had not been exposed to the influence of the church missions. In 1933, the Jewish community in Australia was at the point of collapse. The First World War had profoundly disrupted the community and taken a significant proportion of its young men. There was no mechanism for bringing non-Jewish marriage partners into the community. Religious apathy had strangled all moves towards religious reform.

In any colonial British society, any move to break away from the authority of the British Chief Rabbinate was akin to high treason against the empire and the crown. For generations it had been wrongly assumed and believed that Jews had been allowed back into England in the days of Oliver Cromwell on condition that no converts from Christianity to Judaism would be allowed. All the early battles against Jewish religious reform in Australia before the Second World War were conducted around the issue of conversion—though why anyone should actually have wanted to become part of this inward looking, embarrassed embattled minority is hard to imagine. It is testimony to the power of the compelling concept of the simple unity of God, and the beauty of the Jewish religious year, that individuals battled to bend the rules and find a way 'in'.

The demographer Dr Charles Price notes that, on the basis of immigration records, naturalisation certificates and population trends, there should have been 15 800 Jewish males in the Australian census of 1933—calculating the figures from 1881. Instead, there were 12 200. In other words, there were about 3 600 fewer males than could have been expected which—even allowing for some margin of error in migration estimates, and for the casualties sustained on the battlefields—suggests that nearly one quarter of the expected total had either lapsed from Judaism, or had not been raised Jewishly because a Jewish parent had married a gentile and their children had been raised as Christians.¹⁰ The female loss was considerably lower: not 25 per cent but 15 per cent. Dr Price estimates

that of the nearly two thousand German Jewish males who arrived in Australia between 1851 and 1910, and who were subsequently naturalised, only 376 still returned themselves as Jews in the 1911 census.¹¹

These were disastrous statistics for a small Jewish community. These statistics also explain why so many Australians have a Jewish grandparent in their family tree.

Thanks to the migration caused by the rise of Hitler, the Jewish population of Australia increased by one third between 1933 and 1947, when 32 019 said they were Jews. But

Australian commonwealth immigration authorities very carefully rationed and controlled Jewish immigration. By 1961, Holocaust survivors who wished to get as far away from Europe as possible, and the massive post-war migration from Europe and England, doubled the number of Jews; there were now more than 60 000 Jews in Australia. The rationing of entry permits meant that even though the numbers doubled, the proportion of Jews within the general Australian population remained at 0.5, or one person in every two hundred. That proportion has remained constant since the arrival of the first fleet in 1788.

Since 1961, migration has continued with the arrivals coming from the former Soviet Union and South Africa; today, there are about 90 000 Jews—which must be considered a much more viable self-confident community than Australia could possibly have seen only a generation ago. One hundred years ago, Australia was thirty-sixth in the list of world Jewish communities. Today, sadly, it is twelfth.

Today, for the first time in Australian Jewish history, we are 12 non-stop hours by jet from the West Coast of America which, since the end of the Second World War, has become home to a Jewish community that numbers 600 000-700 000. We may be 'the edge of the diaspora'—as Dr Suzanne Rutland titled her book about Australian Jewish history—but it is a diaspora that travels. My congregational religious school is exchanging letters with children in Singapore. Last week a close friend and congregant flew off to Los Angeles to do some babysitting for her son who had to go to Shanghai for a textile trade fair, leaving his very pregnant wife alone in Los Angeles. Last week I called up to the Torah—prior to their marriage—a Melbourne man and his Californian bride to be. They had actually met through the Internet! Every morning I download the latest *Jerusalem Post* and week by week the London *Jewish Chronicle*! Soon the evening news in Hebrew will be available on cable.

The revival of Hebrew as a modern language must have helped to bring about the establishment of a network of Jewish day schools throughout Australia. However, there is another more subtle reason for sending a Jewish child to a Jewish school. The non-Jewish private and public schools totally ignore the Jewish presence in human history—except when the class studies *Oliver Twist*, *The Merchant of Venice* or the *Gospel of St John*. No-one learns about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the Bar Kochba revolt, the Golden Age of Spain, the lustre of Maimonides, the tragedy of the Crusades, the age of the ghetto, or the Emancipation. Nobody is aware of the fact that literacy in Europe for centuries was confined to the clergy and the Jews, and that books in Hebrew were among the first to be printed in Europe. The Holocaust must be one of the most significant events of the twentieth century, but it would be astounding to find a single Australian school textbook that devotes more than a single paragraph to it.

I spent a semester of my childhood in Perth—I was sent to Hale School. I was ten years of age and, apparently, the only Jewish boy in the school. We were studying British history (what other kind of history was there?), and the teacher read a sentence from the textbook mentioning that Disraeli was 'of Jewish origin'. The whole class burst into booing and I realised that I was a stranger though I had no idea why this should be. I suddenly thought of this incident a few weeks ago, when I was reading, in the *Report of the Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*, about 'the continual denigration' of the aboriginality of the stolen children and the pain that you come to live with if you lose your community and your sense of identity.

In all of the capital cities of Australia, grandiose synagogues have been built. In Melbourne and Sydney, they stand on St Kilda Rd, and facing Hyde Park, respectively; they are large ornate buildings that say, 'we belong here; we worship God like you do and we demand respect'.

Professor Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, remembers his father's synagogue in the German city of Hanover. The building was destroyed in 1938. As Schorsch writes, '[a]n ideology ready to torch synagogues would be undeterred by genocide. The desecration of sacred space foreshadowed the destruction of human life.'¹²

Nevertheless, as Schorsch points out, the grand synagogues of Europe marked a new age in the history of Judaism.

The German synagogue grew to be nearly coterminous with Judaism itself. Physical prominence came to reflect religious importance. Not only had emancipated Judaism been largely recast in the mould of Christianity, but the synagogue ended up as the last arena in which it was practised, and quite differently from before. It was no longer just a place to *daven*, to pray with a *minyan*, to discharge a divine obligation without fanfare. It operated now primarily as a medium for transmitting the essence of Judaism to a congregation that was Jewishly illiterate and reluctant to abide by much more.¹³

The Australian Jewish community has dramatically changed since it built its grand buildings; it has understood that without Jewish schools there will be no *shuls*, no need for synagogues. The building of schools has cost the Australian Jewish community millions of dollars and endless hours of effort; they are now seen to be more significant in the transmission of Jewish civilisation than the sanctuary.

After the Second World War, with the physical growth of the Australian Jewish community, the network of Jewish schools began to grow. Dr Peter Medding, in the introduction of his 1973 collection of essays on Jews in Australian society, quotes Prime Minister John Gorton at the opening of a Jewish day school in Melbourne.

The school teaches what is in fact the great strength in Australia; whether one is of Scottish descent and the Presbyterian faith, or of Irish descent and the Catholic faith, or of English descent and a member of the Church of England, or of Jewish descent and the Jewish faith - we are members of one community working for the same objective - that all may practise their faith without fear, that there is a place for the individual human spirit, and that the individual man is the cornerstone on which a nation can be built.¹⁴

Medding comments: 'This was a far cry from the 1930s. Moreover, being bracketed with high status Presbyterians must have indicated to many Jews that they had made it.'¹⁵

I am not sure that we want to 'make it'. There is strength in being part of a minority. It generates the creative tension that is so valuable. The American Jewish historian and ideologist, Ellis Rivkin, writes that

[t]he Jews were not able to have an ordinary history. They were tossed about and dispersed throughout much of mankind. Wherever they found themselves they adapted creatively, shaping as many diverse forms of Judaism as there were diverse problems threatening their survival. But however the concept and the forms changed, the commitment to the unity principle was never abandoned. The one God was always conceptualised so that His sovereignty over diversity was sustained and God's power to solve problems creatively reaffirmed through their solution. Jewish

survival is proof that Jews have, thus far, been able to preserve their identity by periodically reshaping it.¹⁶

Early in a synagogue service the congregation recites the *Shema*, the proclamation from the Torah of God's unity: 'Hear (understand) O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One'. What can be said after this statement? The prayer book solves this dilemma by speaking about the history leading to the song, sung by the children of Israel at the shores of the Sea of Reeds. Using this technique, let me therefore turn to the nuts and bolts of Australian Jewish life today.

In 1993, the Jewish Welfare Society of Victoria and the Commonwealth Bureau of Immigration Research jointly published a detailed study, 'The Melbourne Jewish community: a needs assessment study', that attempted to gauge present and future trends within Australia's largest and most viable Jewish community.¹⁷

In a 1968 study of the Melbourne Jewish community by Peter Medding, no less than 140 formal Jewish organisations were found to exist.¹⁸ In 1991 there were 200. There are currently 20 congregations and nine fee-paying day schools; in 1945 there were five Jewish congregations in Melbourne and no Jewish day school in Australia. In addition, in 1993, there were no less than 15 separate Melbourne Jewish organisations catering to the welfare needs of the community. There are a whole raft of Jewish organisations dedicated to Israel, Zionist movements of every ideological colour, cultural groups, historical groups, a brand new Jewish museum, a Holocaust Memorial museum, and numerous Jewish sports clubs. There are Jewish radio programs and even an amateur television program. Jewish life in Australia means belonging and giving. Eighty-four per cent of the adult community contributed to a Jewish cause in 1993—the year the survey was conducted.

The community I belong to began a day school almost 20 years ago. The school has 450 students and remits fees worth one million dollars each year, thus enabling children from disadvantaged homes to attend the school. There is nothing to stop the remainder sending their children to Scotch College or Melbourne Grammar—but for reasons of cultural and religious identity, Jewish parents make the considerable financial sacrifice to maintain a day school which will not turn away a child for financial reasons. Every Jewish school does the same. Why?

Around one third of those interviewed in the 1993 community survey identified themselves as 'traditional religious'; 15 per cent said they were 'liberal' or 'reform'; 6 per cent said they were 'strictly orthodox'; and 43 per cent say they are 'Jewish but not religious'. Despite this large vote of non-confidence in religion, the proportion of Jews who 'never attend' synagogue services has decreased, since Medding's 1967 survey, from 16 per cent to 6 per cent, and 'regular worshippers' have increased from 15 per cent to 21 per cent. Nine out of ten Jews in Melbourne identify 'strongly' with Israel, but very few would wish to live there. Their attachment to Israel extends to frequent visits—70 per cent of Jews in Australia have relatives or close friends who live in Israel. Most Jewish young people spend time in Israel either during or following the completion of their schooling.

Two out of every three Jews in Melbourne regularly read the *Australian Jewish News*—85 per cent read it 'often' or 'occasionally'. Jews want to know what is happening in the Jewish world. One quarter of Melbourne's Jews believe that anti-Semitism is a significant problem in Australia, and 70 per cent reported that they had experienced anti-Semitism in their daily life.

However, 30 per cent named 'assimilation' and a 'loss of identity' as the major problem facing Australian Jewry. Thirty per cent had 'only' Jewish friends and 12 per cent said they had mainly non-Jewish friends. Half the respondents replied that they would feel 'sad' if a close Jewish friend told them they intended to marry a non-Jew. Only 1 per cent would prefer their children or grandchildren to be brought up as a non Jew—92 per cent would prefer or 'strongly desire' that their children were Jews; I find that an amazing statistic.

It is not easy to be a Jew and not very safe. It is far more comfortable to sink into the anonymity of secular, or Christian, Australia. Words and hopes are easy but actions are more difficult. Eighty-five per cent of Melbourne's Jews attend a Passover *seder*, 60 per cent choose to fast on *Yom Kippur*, 60 per cent attend a family gathering on Friday night, and nearly all include at least some of the religious rituals associated with Sabbath in their homes. Over 80 per cent of the Jews felt positive about being Jewish. Five per cent are 'neutral' or confess to harbour 'slight' feelings against being Jewish. Three quarters of Jewish primary age children attend a Jewish day school, a statistic unequalled anywhere else in the diaspora. Finally, in 1991, 31 per cent of Melbourne's Jews had experienced incarceration in a Nazi concentration camp. Together with their children, this group exceeds 60 per cent of the community. It is no exaggeration to say that the Holocaust dominates Melbourne Jewry's psyche and marks its soul.

Can you imagine what all this has done to the spiritual legacy of the Jews? The German-born Jewish theologian Emil Fackenheim suggests that, following the Second World War, there is a new commandment: we may not grant Hitler a 'posthumous victory' by ceasing to be Jews. Through assimilation and through a military catastrophe in the Middle East, the possibility of a twenty-first century without Jews is all too real.

If the 1993 Melbourne survey was optimistic and upbeat in its measurement of Australian Jewish identity and survival, the April 1997 'Report of the task force on Jewish continuity of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies' is devastatingly pessimistic.¹⁹ Although there are 35000 (or more) Jews in New South Wales, the report estimates that there are only '15 000 highly or moderately committed Jews in our community'.²⁰ The two principal problems identified by the task force were indifference and apathy towards Judaism, and the inability of the community's leadership to implement any meaningful program of change. The report begins by suggesting that many members of the community are being lost and that 'almost all of their grandchildren will cease to identify as Jews in a meaningful way within one or two generations'.²¹ The report laments the fact that the Sydney Jewish community does not have a sizeable core of involved people—proximity to each other is seen to reinforce identification.

An example is to be found in the Melbourne community which is distinguished by the four square kilometre area in North Caulfield where there seems to be a proliferation of Jews on the streets and shops displaying Jewish wares. This ability to openly display and live one's Judaism in circumstances, where to do so, appears to be a normal part of everyday life, is a powerful incentive to those seeking to participate and to identify as Jews.²²

Of course, in many respects the Australian Jewish community is a microcosm of world Jewry. It has a deep religious divide between modernists and traditionalists, between orthodox and progressive Judaism. Both Melbourne and Sydney have thousands of Jewish newcomers who have arrived from the former Soviet Union. These families have been cut off from active Jewish religious life and culture for at least three generations, and are genuinely bewildered by their encounter with the synagogue and with a voluntary Jewish community.

Melbourne, in particular, is deeply affected by the aftermath of the European Holocaust; the same is true of the Jewish world in general. The savage destruction of European Jewry has created a deep existential and theological crisis about God's omnipotence and the meaning of Jewish existence. What right do we have to bring children into the world who may in time be hunted down and murdered because they are Jews? How dare we teach our children to be Jewish, or even circumcise our baby boys, after those dark and terrible days? There was a theological dimension to the clinically named 'Operation Desert Storm', during which Israeli parents had to teach their children how to put on gas masks. When Saudi Arabia and Egypt constantly reprint the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Iraq, and Libya and Syria and Iran develop nuclear and biological weaponry aimed at Israel, apocalyptic visions seem commonplace and logical.

The Holocaust has an overwhelming meaning to the Jewish People. The survivors emerged from the camps with their faith in God either shattered or affirmed. Let me mention three Jewish children who survived the Holocaust. One is the Ashkenazi Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Israel. The second is the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris. A third is the present American Secretary of State! Some child survivors have become commanders in chief of the Israel Defence Force; most survivors simply gave up their Jewish religion but not their Jewish identity.

What seemed clear to Jewish survivor and non-survivor alike was that the world was indifferent to Jewish suffering and, after a while, some even saw the victims as deserving their fate. It was clear the citizens of the most cultured Christian, scientific country in Europe rapidly had become, in Professor Joshua Goldhagen's memorable phrase, 'Hitler's willing executioners'. It followed, therefore, from the viewpoint of the victims, that there must be something profoundly wrong with Christianity, with western culture and with science.

One way to cope with this nightmarish conclusion is to turn one's back on the outside world—shut out the television, dress distinctively, avoid contact with the secular world and perceive God as vengeful: 'Even though You destroy me yet will I believe in You'. From this statement of faith it follows that there has to be an end to suffering; God will intervene. God's signs are everywhere. The computer is made to find hidden codes in the letters of the Torah. The return of the Jews to Israel is a sign—even though the modern political structure of the State of Israel and the ideological basis of Zionism is deeply flawed by democratic ideals, and a legal system that speaks of human rights and accepts women as equal to men.

Yet the possibility exists that the messiah—the redeemer, the king—is coming. Perhaps he was already here in the form of the Chassidic Rebbe from Lubavitch who died a few years ago. There are even those who believe fervently that he will return. There are others who believe that a letter or petition addressed to his grave will accomplish wonders. The Lubavitch movement has a political face and declares that not one inch of the Holy Land should be handed over to gentiles. The Lubavitch movement aggressively recruits the children of secular Jews who dimly remember photographs of a bearded saintly looking grandfather who met his death as a martyr in Poland. Today, almost all orthodox rabbis—though not orthodox Jews—in Australia are followers of the Lubavitch movement.

I obviously belong to the opposite ideological camp. Of course the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel and of Hebrew has deeply affected progressive Jews as well, but I cannot cease to be a citizen of the world. Western civilisation has been profoundly shaped by the course of Jewish history, and I agree with the distinguished Professor Eugene Borowitz of the Hebrew Union

College in New York, who recently said that most diaspora Jews can now be classified as 'crypto reform' Jews. He explains that the

average, urban, educated Jew knows that conscience is what guides people, that individual decision making is basic to the process...They listen to the rabbi in the synagogue, then decide in private, how they are going to be Jewish. They know that conscience is what governs people, and the individual decision making is basic to the process.²³

There is no doubt that, for most Jews, the medieval feudal concept of the divine died at Auschwitz, Treblinka and Maidanek. In the diaspora, the ideological struggle to adjust to a liberal, secular, post-Christian, post-Emancipation, post-Holocaust world is over. In Israel, Jewish identity and Israeli identity are blurred, and the theological issues have been put to one side. Prior generations worried about God's existence; the next generation's problem is how to be Jewish within the meaning of the historic biblical covenant. Continuity in name conceals a world of difference.

The covenant is a very difficult concept to maintain. Very few Australians, Jewish or non-Jewish, learn the Bible at school. The great stories and themes that lie at the heart of western literature and philosophy are fading from our world. This is an era in which you can no longer study the Hebrew Bible at University (or Latin or Classical Greek or Aramaic for that matter). This is a country where fewer than 10 per cent of young people in years 11 or 12 of their schooling study history of any kind.

Yet, the wonder that is at the centre of life will not go away. There are always gods of gold and silver and steel or flesh ready to step in and seize the hearts and minds of men and women. I cannot tell whether Judaism will defy secularism and survive in Australia. I would like to believe that it will. But a great deal will depend upon the healthy ability of the Jewish community to understand that it carries within it a transcendent and powerful vision of the universe.

An epilogue

Harry Rosetree of Sarsaparilla, in his unguarded moments, remembers his father teaching him the symbols of the Jewish year. 'Our history', his father would say to him, 'is all we have'. But Harry has left his heritage far behind. The arrival of Mordecai Himmelfarb, a Jew, makes a most disturbing intrusion into his self-induced amnesia. Himmelfarb has a small battered fibre suitcase which he always carries with him—until it is stolen and then returned.

The story, of course, is in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*.²⁴

Rosetree wonders what is in the suitcase. In fact, he becomes obsessed with it.

'For Chrissake,' he asked, 'what for do you need this demmed case?'

How repellent he found all miserable reffo Jews. And this one in particular, the owner of the cheap, dented case. Then the old Jew looked down his cheekbones. He took a key from an inner pocket. The case sprang tinnily, almost indecently open.

'I do not care to leave them at home.' Himmelfarb explained.

Harry Rosetree held his breath. There was no avoiding it; he would have to look inside the case. And did. Briefly. He saw, indeed what he had feared; the fringes of the *Tallith*, the black thongs of the *Tephillin*, wound round and round the Name.

Mr Rosetree could have been in some agony.

'Put it away then!' He trembled. 'All this *Quatsch!* Will you Jews never learn that you will be made to suffer for the next time also?'

'If it has to be,' Himmelfarb replied, manipulating the catches of his case.

'A lot of Quatsch! Mr Rosetree repeated.

The intolerable humid weather had the worst effect on him. As his face showed.

The wretched Jew had begun to go.

'Himmelfarb!' Mr Rosetree called, through rubbery, almost unmanageable lips 'You better take two days,' he ordered, 'for the Seder business. But keep it quiet, the reason why. For all anyone will know,' here he became hatefully congested, 'you could have gone...' but still choked, with some disgust for phlegm or words.

His veins were protesting, to say nothing of his purple skin. '...SICK,' he finally succeeded finally in shouting.'

Himmelfarb mutters to himself in response: 'Who will decide what forms sickness takes?'

In Patrick White's novel, Himmelfarb will die the death of a martyr, murdered by ignorance and fear.

An Australia without a religious dimension is an Australia which, by definition, has no inner depth. It would be a mean and impoverished Australia that denies its past and has no vision of the future. It would be a one-dimensional Australia where the most profound emotions have no consequences—a place where people marry and get buried with no hint of transcendence or meaning, a land where 'anything goes' as long as it doesn't frighten the horses.

In the biblical book of Esther, Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman. The first Mordecai will not submit to anyone other than God. The family name of Patrick White's Mordecai, 'Himmelfarb', means the colour of heaven. In that little battered fictional box lie his prayer shawl, his prayer book and his phylacteries.

No wonder it terrifies and enrages the secular Harry Rosetree—it reminds him of a heritage that he prefers to deny!

GLOSSARY:

chutzpah—impudence

daven—pray

mazel—luck, good fortune

minyan—quorum for prayer

Quatsch (German)—nonsense

Rebbe—the teacher in the Chassidic tradition

schlimmazel—bad luck

Shoah—Holocaust

shtetl—small town

tallith—prayer shawl

tephillin—phylacteries

Torah—teaching, inspiration

¹ Smart, N. 1996, *Dimensions of the sacred—an anatomy of the world's beliefs*, HarperCollins, London, p 252.

² Cowen, Z. 1967, *Isaac Isaacs*, OUP, Melbourne, p 191f.

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- 3 Serle, G. 1982, *John Monash—a biography*, Melbourne University Press,
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- 4 Ibid., pp 170-175.
- 5 Patai, R. (ed) 1960, *The complete diaries of Theodor Herzl*, The Theodor Herzl
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21.
- 7 Dershowitz, AM. 1997, *The vanishing American Jew—in search of Jewish identity
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- 8 Ibid., p 55.
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- 11 Ibid.
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pp 206ff.
- 13 Ibid.
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- 15 Ibid.
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the findings of the Jewish community survey 1991*, Jewish Welfare Society,
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- 18 Medding, PY. 1968, *From assimilation to group survival—a political and sociological
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- 19 Typed manuscript of the report.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 *The National Post and Opinion*, 13 June 1997.
- 24 1964, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria; quotations from p 378-379.