



Marking the birth of SA's JEWISH COMMUNITY

From humble beginnings to producing our own Rabbinate

BY DAVID SAKS



INSET: Benjamin Norden, first President of the Cape Town Hebrew Congreg. LEFT AND MIDDLE: The old Gardens Shul then and now. RIGHT: Business magnate and pioneer Sammy Marks, one of the most successful of the Lithuanian Jewish immigrants.

AT THE TIME OF WRITING, SHAVUOT IS JUST A few days away. On *Motzai Shabbos*, thousands of community members will be coming together in shuls and *batei midrashim* throughout the country for the traditional *Tikkun Leil* learning programme. It all provides a dramatic contrast to the first Jewish communal prayer service in South Africa, held on Erev Yom Kippur, 1841, in the home of Cape Town businessman Benjamin Norden. The congregation on that occasion consisted of just 17 worshipers. Modest as these beginnings were, though, they planted a seed that over time grew into a flourishing tree, with branches extending to all parts of the country. 2016 is the 175th anniversary of that inaugural gathering, which marked the formal birth of the South African Jewish community.

For all that has been accomplished, the story of South African Jewry should not be seen as one of steady upward progression. The newly-established Cape Town Jewish Congregation struggled for a long time to establish itself on a secure footing, its first minister Rev Isaac Pulver lasted only two years before departing in dismay for Australia and, almost predictably, internal disputes led to the tiny community splitting into rival congregations for a while. Inevitably, assimilation

and intermarriage took its toll. Gradually, however, the situation improved, and in due course further congregations were established, in Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, Graaff-Reinet, and Kimberley.

In 1880, there were perhaps 4000 Jews in South Africa, most of them of English or German origin. In the course of a decade, the situation changed dramatically with the commencement of a wave of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, mainly Lithuania. The Litvak influx rapidly swamped the Anglo-German establishment (although the latter, being wealthier and better integrated, continued for a while to play a disproportionate role in communal affairs). While some failed to establish themselves in the new land, the majority of the newcomers by and large found their niche, and of those, a remarkable proportion went on to achieve considerable success. Interestingly, over the decades, the trend has been towards a deepening of Jewish religious learning and practice, with the community today generally being a great deal more involved than their forebears. This alone makes SA Jewry almost unique amongst other Diaspora communities, where the movement has been in the other direction.

Cape Town Jewry has already held a number of events to mark the 175th anni-

versary. Later this year the SA Jewish Museum, with the involvement of the SA-JBD, will host an exhibition on the community's history, aimed at telling the story as much as possible from the point of view of ordinary Jewish South Africans, rather than that of more well-known personalities. Another upcoming highlight of the commemorations is the visit of Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, who will be speaking at both the Great Synagogue in Cape Town and at the SA-JBD's Gauteng Council conference. Therein lies a story that speaks volumes about where SA Jewry today finds itself. For well over a century, the community had to 'import' its rabbinical leaders from elsewhere, mainly from England. Who could then have anticipated that rabbis with a "Made in South Africa" stamp would one day hold important pulpits throughout the UK and the Commonwealth, let alone that one of them would become Chief Rabbi? In the end, all this has come to pass. South African-born and trained rabbis are practising throughout the world and Rabbi Mirvis, who was born in Johannesburg and held his first pulpits in Cape Town, is one of them. His example testifies to how far this Jewish community has come since its humble pioneering days. ■