INTRODUCTION

The history of the Jewish people spans four millennia, from the time of the biblical patriarch, Abraham, to the present day. Judaism is one of the oldest religions and the first monotheistic one. Throughout its history, the Jewish religion has not remained static and its ability to adapt and evolve helps to explain its survival into the modern era. The belief in one God, in moral ethics based upon the Ten Commandments, and in the covenant between God, the Children of Israel and the Land of Israel, set out in Genesis, the first book of the Torah (Hebrew Bible), have remained central features. The covenant is symbolised by the circumcision of all males at the age of eight days, a practice that has distinguished Jews throughout the ages. The belief in the common origins of the Jewish people with the Abrahamic covenant explains the ethnic identity of Jews today, so that Jewish identity is best understood as ethnic and religious.

The first two millennia of Jewish history centred in and around the Land of Israel, but already in 586 BCE, after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, the first dispersion took place. Known by the Greek word '*diaspora*', meaning dispersion, the first major Jewish settlement outside Israel was established in Babylon at that time, although Jews were permitted to return to what was then called Judah after 550 BCE, the start of the Second Jewish Commonwealth. This lasted until 70 CE, when the Second Temple was destroyed during the first major Jewish rebellion against the Romans, who captured many of the rebels and took them as slaves to Rome. The second phase of dispersion, from 70 CE, led to Jewish communities eventually being established throughout the world. In each case the Jewish community

1

existed as a minority, struggling for survival against the forces of anti-semitism, which often aimed at the physical destruction of Jewry. Jews were also threatened by the pressures of assimilation, which undermined distinctive Jewish religious practice and belief through the assumption of the host society's culture.

During the medieval period, Jews lived either under the crescent, with Islam, or the cross, with Christianity, and two different strands of Jewish tradition emerged. The main centre of Jewish life in the Muslim world was Spain, so that Jews deriving from Mesopotamia, Spain, Portugal and North Africa became known as Sephardi (literally Spanish), whilst the main area of Jewish life under Christianity centred around the Rhineland, so that Jews deriving from northern, central and eastern Europe are called Ashkenazi (literally German).

These themes of diaspora existence are central to the story of the Jews in Australia – which emerged initially from English Jewry. Australian Jewry is one of the youngest diaspora communities established on the 'edge of the Diaspora', with only New Zealand Jewry being further away from the Jewish centre of Israel.

Jewish life in England

The emergence of Jewish life in England is a fairly recent phenomenon in the span of Jewish history. The first organised Jewish communities developed after the Norman invasion of 1066 when Jews were encouraged to settle in England because of their financial skills. This period was fairly short-lived, as Jews were expelled in 1290 after a century of increasing anti-Jewish persecution and massacres, such as the one that occurred in York in 1190 at the time of the Third Crusade. For the next three and a half centuries, Jews were not permitted to live in England. When William Shakespeare wrote his well-known work, *The Merchant of Venice*, there were no Jews living openly as Jews, and his famous Jewish character, the avaricious Shylock, was based on an earlier Italian work – although a community of secret Jews had already moved to England from Portugal.

The origins of present-day British Jewry were thus embedded in the Sephardi tradition of secret Judaism. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, many sought refuge in Portugal, but they were all then informed of the 1497 expulsion edict, which was followed

immediately by the forced conversion of most of Portuguese Jewry to Catholicism. Many of these converted Jews, known as Conversos, or by the derogatory term '*marranos*', meaning 'swine', practised their Judaism in secret for over a century, particularly in Portugal. At the end of the sixteenth century, it became easier for these New Christians to escape, and a number settled in the Netherlands, where they were able to practise their Judaism openly from the beginning of the seventeenth century, and in England. While a *converso* community, whose Jewish connections were recognised, was established by the 1590s during the reign of Elizabeth I, the first open Jewish service was not held until 1655 when the Dutch rabbi of Portuguese origins, Menasseh ben Israel, arrived to seek the official readmission of Jews. In a petition of 13 November 1655, Menasseh requested of Oliver Cromwell:

> 1. The first thing which I ask of your Highness is that our Hebrew nation be received and admitted into this mighty republic under the protection and care of your Highness like the citizens themselves, and for greater security in the future I entreat your Highness, if it is agreeable to you, to order all your commanders and generals to defend us on all occasions.[1]

This petition was considered at a special Whitehall Conference held in December 1655, which failed to come to a definitive conclusion, despite Cromwell's desire to promote Jewish settlement in England because of their financial skills and mercantile connections. Menasseh ben Israel died during his return journey to Amsterdam, a broken man, but his visit resulted in the open practice of Judaism in London even though the expulsion order of 1290 was never officially revoked. Summing up the significance of these events, historian of British Jewry, David Katz, has written: 'Although Jews in England would not become fully emancipated until the middle of the nineteenth century, their residence here rested on a secure foundation with the admission at the Whitehall Conference that "there is no Law that forbids the Jews return into *England*" '.[2]

Sephardi Jews flourished during the second half of the seventeenth century under the tolerant regime of English society. On 23 June 1700, Solomon de Medina was the first Jew to be knighted. They had their own religious structure headed by a *haham* (rabbinical leader, Hebrew for 'wise man').

Sir Moses Montefiore, scion of a leading Sephardi family, a number of whom were founding members of Jewish communities in Australia

This community was reinforced during the eighteenth century with the arrival of Ashkenazi Jews fleeing European persecution and discriminatory measures, and seeking a better life in England. They established separate religious organs, out of which emerged the chief rabbinate, later led by Dr Nathan Marcus Adler (1803–1890), one of the most influential figures of Anglo-Jewry. Adler, who was German born, filled the position of chief rabbi of British Jewry for almost half a century (1845–1890) and his ideas were continued by his son, Dr Hermann Adler (1891–1911). Nathan Adler recognised that the Ashkenazi Jews had become sufficiently acculturated to consider themselves English, and had lost their skills in Hebrew and Yiddish,[3] and he began to modernise, reorganise and anglicise the Ashkenazi community. He introduced a shorter form of the service and English sermons. Synagogue worship came to possess an air of organised formality and decorum, which was foreign to the Eastern European Jewish tradition. It became typical of English orthodoxy to build a single cathedral-like synagogue, unlike the small, intimate synagogues of Eastern Europe.[4]

As a result of Adler's policies, Anglo-Jewry developed a distinctive religious outlook, which combined 'orthodoxy and efficiency, piety and dignity, and modernity of method with strict adherence to tradition'.[5] Its communal life was well organised and religious practices were modified to meet the challenges of emancipation. These developments reflected both Jewish tradition and English culture; they emerged from a process of evolution rather than revolution, just as British democracy emerged gradually through parliamentary reform over the course of the nineteenth century. The anglicising of Judaism was to be of great importance in the development of the early Australian Jewish community, which was reliant on the British chief rabbinate until the 1930s.

The European experience

The Jewish experience on continental Europe was very different from that of Anglo-Jewry, as the well-established Jewish communities in western and eastern Europe were affected by enlightenment and revolution. In the West, emancipation occurred suddenly at the end of the eighteenth century, largely as a result of the French Revolution of 1789 and the Napoleonic conquests, when the discriminatory ordinances against Jews, forcing them to live in ghettos and restricting their movement and activities, were lifted and they were granted equality. In the East, the process took much longer, and was much less complete,

so that Jews living in Tsarist Russia continued to suffer from discrimination until the revolution of 1917.

As the ghetto walls were gradually broken down and Jews were accepted into the general community, Jewish life and religious practice faced great challenges. In response, various initiatives were introduced to reconcile traditional Judaism with the modern lifestyle. These included the development of modern Orthodox, Reform and Conservative Judaism, and the more secular responses of Zionism and Bundism, a movement that sought to combine Yiddish culture with Judaism's ideals of social justice.[6] As a result of these developments, being a Jew could no longer be equated with the rigid practice of Judaism. The Jewish way of life was no longer a uniform one, since it manifested in many forms, and Jews came to see Jewish identity as a range of options: religious, cultural or national, or various combinations of these.

Initiatives to reconcile traditional Judaism with modern lifestyles were first introduced by the reformers in Germany in the early nineteenth century. Many Westernised German Jews found the traditional synagogue service, with its nasal singsong, occasional bargaining for the recital of prayers and lack of decorum, completely distasteful. Their desire to create a more dignified and aesthetic service resulted in the establishment in 1818 of a liberal temple in Hamburg, the Israelitischer Tempelverein, where the playing of organ music, a desecration of the Jewish Sabbath according to orthodox Judaism, was also introduced. This marked the beginning of the Reform movement, which at first did not have a sufficient philosophy to justify its ritual changes. Abraham Geiger (1810–1870) provided this philosophical basis by emphasising that Jewish spiritual and ethical values were more important than outward manifestations of Jewish practice and worship. During the 1840s, three Reform conferences held in Germany further consolidated Reform theology.

Two leading Jewish thinkers responded to Reform Judaism which they saw as going too far, and created two other branches of Modern Judaism. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), who co-incidentally attended the same university as Geiger, developed the neo-orthodox approach, which demonstrated that secular knowledge and aesthetic forms of worship were not inconsistent with Jewish tradition. Rabbi Zacharias Frankel (1801–1875) developed Conservative Judaism as a middle-of-the-road compromise between the rigidity of orthodoxy and the extremism of Reform. This movement accepted the need to adapt Judaism to modern challenges, but stressed that the

principles of change must be found in the historical dynamics of the Jewish people. The Conservatives maintained that Judaism could not dismiss important traditions embedded in the community.

In addition to religious change, the challenges of nineteenth-century developments in Europe produced secular responses, Of these, the growth of political Zionism was most important. The father of modern political Zionism was Theodore Herzl (1860–1904), a secular Jew who was born in Budapest and became a journalist and writer after studying law in Vienna. As the Paris correspondent of a leading Viennese newspaper, he covered the Dreyfus Affair of 1894, when a French army captain, who was also Jewish, was unjustly accused of selling secret documents to Germany. Herzl was aroused when he heard French protestors at the trial chanting 'Death to the Jews'. He elaborated the theory that the only answer to antisemitism was Jewish self-determination through the 'return to Zion'. In 1897, he founded the World Zionist movement at the first Zionist Congress, which was held at Basle in Switzerland.

In the same year, another secular organisation, the Bundist movement, also held its founding meeting as the General Jewish Workers' Association in Lithuania. Its response to antisemitism was opposed to Herzl's, with its leaders arguing that the only way to solve the problem was to change the local society. They wished to achieve such change through a synthesis of non-revolutionary Marxism, Yiddish culture and Judaism's ideals of social justice. The movement was anti-religious and anti-Zionist.[7] Many Bundist refugees took these ideals with them to Western Europe and the United States.

The New World

Both Reform and Conservative Judaism established themselves in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1840 and 1880, about 300 000 German Jews settled, and they established the reform movement there. It became more radical than in Europe, partly because of 'liberal' Christian influences. Under the leadership of Rabbi Israel Wise, who built the Reform movement in Cincinnati, the guiding principles of United States Reform were developed, being formalised in the Pittsburgh Platform in 1885. This changed the traditional belief in a personal Messiah to belief in a universal Messiah. As the United States was seen as 'the new Zion', so the positive aspects of Jewish dispersion were emphasised, and Reform Judaism argued that this dispersal enabled Jews to carry Jewish ethics

and morality to the world and so hasten the coming of the Messianic Age. The idea that the Bible was literally inspired was rejected, and only its moral laws were seen as binding. All laws that did not adapt to the habits of modern civilisation, including kosher dietary laws and strict Sabbath observance, were abrogated. Reform Judaism wished to retain the ethical values of traditional Judaism, whilst rejecting the strict observance and ritualism of orthodoxy.[8]

From 1880 to 1920, over two million Eastern European Jews fled the pogroms in Tsarist Russia and sought a new life in the United States. Many of these newcomers were more attracted to Conservative Judaism – for which Solomon Schechter had developed an organised structure – than Reform, so that by 1915 it had emerged as a third force in US Judaism.

Australian Jewish responses

In Australia, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the situation was very different. Australian Jewry was more conservative, and the limited reaction to these overseas developments underlined the weaknesses of the Jewish communities. These weaknesses were to prevail until the major immigration influxes before and after World War II.

Daniel Elazar and Peter Medding have described the Jewish communities that developed in the nineteenth century as having emerged within a frontier society. Louis Hartz, in his seminal work, *The Founding of New Societies*, described such societies:

> [they were] fragments that were broken off, as it were, from European civilisation, and had to implant themselves in new soil, pursuing lines of development that reflected their European heritage but were, nevertheless, substantially different because of the transplantation. These fragments began their separate development from the point at which they were separated from European civilisation as a whole, maintaining patterns common to the civilisation they left behind in forms that remained more or less frozen or took radically different directions from those of their original civilisations, which continue to undergo adaptations of their own.[9]

This pattern of development was evident in the case of Australian Jewry.

The various Jewish settlements in the Australian colonies began as fragments of Anglo-Jewry. As a result of their small numbers and

lack of Jewish learning, the early Australian Jews were fearful of any
change and their pattern of religious life remained frozen in the Anglo-
Jewish mould. The waves of European Jewish immigrants who arrived
between the 1850s and the 1930s were too few in number and too
dispersed geographically to radically change this fossilisation of Jewish
life. The communities that spread throughout Australia continued to
follow the Anglo-Jewish pattern, even when Anglo-Jews were no longer
numerically dominant. The newcomers who arrived before the 1930s
did attempt to introduce changes, but only in a few instances were
these to be lasting. Significant changes began only in the 1930s, with
the refugees from Nazi persecution.

The general Australian community was predominantly British in
origins until after World War II. This British fragment maintained
English culture in the Antipodes, and a distinctive Australian lifestyle
was slow to emerge. The Jewish community sought to conform to
middle-class English standards and, as a result, became 'more British
than the British'.[10] This was reflected in the early 'cathedral' syna-
gogues established in Sydney and Melbourne, which maintained a
'high church atmosphere'.[11]

The transplantation of Jewish life from the insular ghetto societies
of Europe to the free and open Australian society led to a high level of
assimilation of Australian Jewry. Every effort was made until the 1930s
to minimise outward differences, with the majority gentile population
creating an ideology of non-distinctiveness.[12] Most Jews considered
themselves Australians of the Jewish religion, and their response to the
nineteenth-century challenges of modernisation was limited and con-
servative. The various communities developed one uniform reaction –
the Anglo-Jewish form of modern orthodoxy developed by chief rabbis
Nathan and Hermann Adler – and this remained rigid and standard-
ised. All the other forms of modern Judaism and Jewish identification
were either not considered or were rejected. Australian Jewry remained
isolated from the mainstreams of Jewish thought,[13] with its leadership
concentrated in the hands of a few prominent Anglo-Jewish families
who seemed more concerned with civic recognition than with Jewish
consciousness, and this situation changed only with the arrival of the
pre- and post-World War II refugees and Holocaust survivors.

Peter Medding argued, in his study of Melbourne Jewry in the
early 1960s, that after 1933 they moved 'from assimilation to group
survival'. His thesis was supported by contemporary observers of the
period. In 1955, Sydney David Einfeld, a leading figure in Australian
Jewry, delivered a major address on post-war Jewish immigration to

the National Council of Jewish Women in Sydney, part of which was reported in the *Council Bulletin*:

> The absorption of Jews from overseas had a tremendous social and cultural impact on the relatively isolated Australian Jewish community, which was predominantly of a conservative British outlook . . . The newcomers have served the synagogues, the Jewish Day Schools and Young People's camps and have participated in all communal organisations and appeals, especially for Israel.
>
> Without the coming of these migrants, the Australian Jewish community would have stagnated and perhaps have faded completely. Migration means new life, new vigour and new enthusiasm. When the history of the Australian Jewish community was written, Mr Einfeld said, he felt that the period of 1934 to 1954 would be aptly and properly described as the time when Jewish life was preserved, enriched and even revitalised by the enormous influence extended by the Jewish migrant from Europe.[14]

The period from 1934 until 1954 was indeed a watershed in Australian Jewish history. The immigrants brought with them a new and stronger identification with Judaism and Jewish consciousness, transforming every aspect of Jewish life in Australia. The pre-war refugees laid the basis for key changes, and these were built on and extended by the post-war immigrants, who were much more numerous. Their experiences during the Holocaust added a new dimension to Australian Jewry, influencing and changing the attitudes of the established community. The Australian Jews, in turn, assisted in the rapid integration of the Jewish refugees into Australian life, so that the transformation was a two-way process. Jewish life was diversified, with various strands of religious, cultural and social life emerging as Australian Jewry finally incorporated the nineteenth-century changes that had resulted from emancipation and secularisation in Europe. With this, the community came of age.[15]