

Rev Isaac Pulver – the First Minister in South Africa

Rev Pulver was the very first minister to set foot in South Africa. He was sent in 1849, by the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, to minister to the fledgling Cape Town community – but were they ready for him?

Gwynne Robins (née Schrire) wrote an article (below) about him, first published in

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She has given her permission for it to be uploaded onto the CHOL website under 'memoirs' (Subheadings and photographs are by Geraldine Auerbach)



Rev Pulver's plight: Kosher meat or a complacent congregation¹

The Jews living in the British Colonies in the Nineteenth Century were proud to be British citizens. They appreciated being able to live in peace, religious tolerance and security and were satisfied to accept the institutions and practices British citizenship entailed, such as loyalty to their sovereign and British concepts of religious leadership. This was in the person of the rabbi of the Great Synagogue in London who was recognised as the chief rabbi and was deferred to and who, from 1845, was officially designated Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire.² Among his functions was the appointment of rabbis, even in places as far from London as the Cape Colony or New Zealand.³

Since their arrival in the Cape the handful of Jewish settlers had had no contact with any *halachic* authority and there was much they did not know. Once Tikvath Israel, the fledgling Society of the Jewish Community of Cape Town, was established on 26 September 1841, it decided to import a *Sefer Torah* through trading contacts in Frankfurt. They discovered that without the permission of the Chief Rabbi, Dr Solomon Herschell, no *Sefer Torah* could be sent to the Colony.

Unfortunately the Chief Rabbi died before permission could be obtained. The new congregation then launched a collection for a memorial prayer-offering in his name, collecting £3 on behalf of the Cape Town and Grahamstown communities. In the meantime, they managed without the *Sefer Torah*.

It was not easy to be Jewish in the Cape Colony.

There was no *Sefer Torah*, no *tallit*, no rabbi, no *mohel*, no *schochet*, no *mikveh*, no kosher food, no *cheder*. There was no one to assist with dietary advice or requirements; members had to conduct services to the best of their abilities and weddings had to be performed by a Christian minister. In 1843 the Tikvath Israel committee agreed that they should keep in touch

with the new Chief Rabbi and when they had problems, they would write to Chief Rabbi Dr N M Adler. Within three months, depending on the weather and the availability of ships, they would receive a letter with a reply.

After struggling like this for a further two years, Benjamin Norden and Nathan Birkenruth suggested that they approached officials in England or Germany for a minister. However, the committee turned down their proposal. A rabbi, they believed, was a luxury their small congregation could not afford.⁴

In 1846 RE Joseph, a qualified *mohel* arrived. That solved one problem. He brought with him letters from Chief Rabbi Adler advising them to get a minister as soon as possible and acquire a synagogue. That caused another problem and the financial implications split the community. Finally, they agreed to purchase a property to serve as a synagogue and they bought two houses and a store at the corner of Bouquet Street and St Johns Street adjoining the Lodge De Goede Hoop.⁵ Today a plaque on a building marks the site.

A Sefer Torah arrives at last

In June 1848 Aaron de Pass (whose brother Elias was their Honorary Secretary), arrived at the synagogue on his return from a visit to England carrying two letters from the Chief Rabbi and a parcel. The parcel contained a *Sefer Torah*. One letter informed them that Mr P Salaman had kindly donated it, the other urged them to get a rabbi from England.

The *Sefer Torah* was received with delight and a thank you letter was despatched to Mr Salaman but their financial worries remained. After arguing for a month, they agreed to ask the Chief Rabbi to send a rabbi. They specified that they would not pay the rabbi more than £100 a year but would defray the cost of the ocean passage and provide free quarters. They also requested a *tallis* and a code of law.

In time the answer arrived. The Chief Rabbi recommended the Rev Isaac Pulver, the minister of the Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation. At a special meeting it was agreed that the Tikvath Israel congregation would bring out Mr Pulver, his wife and children. The Rev Pulver would not have to repay the passage money and a house would be furnished for his family until a house attached to the synagogue was ready.

Rev Isaac Pulver arrives - causing some conflict

On 8 August 1849 the Rev Isaac Pulver arrived in Cape Town as the reader, *shochet* and *mohel* for the young Cape Town Hebrew Congregation. A delighted Benjamin Norden held a reception at his home to welcome their first minister at which another letter from the Chief Rabbi was read out. In this, the Chief Rabbi instructed the Jewish Community of the Cape to give heed to the Minister's government.

The Rev Pulver then delivered a short address asking them to assist him 'in carrying out the laws for establishing the true religion of the G-d of Israel',⁶ and a month later, on 15 September, he consecrated the first synagogue in South Africa.

However the Chief Rabbi's instruction to heed the minister's government proved an onerous burden for the congregation. They had become used to living without following the demands of *halachah*. For the few Jewish colonists living in the Cape Colony, it was difficult to observe the *mitzvot* and many had fallen into abeyance. Among these were the laws of *kashrut*. Before the

Rev Pulver's arrival, no kosher meat had been obtainable. The local Jews either ate *treife* meat, or did without.

As the first minister to a pioneering community established only eight years earlier and one that had been managing comfortably to live a life independent of religious authority, the Rev Pulver had a difficult task. Naturally he was a religious man. Naturally he observed the commandments and expected to live, as he had before, in a community of like-minded Orthodox Jews.

He found the ways of his congregation a considerable culture shock. In as much as his community in Cape Town found it difficult to cope with the sudden religious expectations imposed on the assimilated lifestyle to which they had become accustomed, the Rev Pulver found it difficult to cope with the non-Orthodox life style prevalent in his congregation. What he wanted, his community did not want. He wanted a *mikvah*, he wanted *matzah*, he wanted kosher meat. Friction was inevitable.

Providing – and accepting – kosher meat

At first the committee tried to assist him in carrying out the *mitzvoth*. He wanted a *mikvah*. A special sub-committee was set up to discuss building a *mikvah*⁷ (apathy and lack of money put paid to that). He wanted *matzah*. A supply of *matzah* was imported from England for Passover. He wanted kosher meat. The committee made arrangements with a firm of butchers for their new minister to practice *Shechita*.

For the first time it was possible to obtain kosher meat in Cape Town, however the supply of that meat was a problem. It was one thing agreeing to buy *matzah* as a one-off purchase, but agreeing to commit oneself to buying more expensive kosher meat on a regular basis was a different matter entirely. To adapt an idiom, you can lead a congregation to water but you cannot make it drink. Without the support of the community, it proved difficult for Rev Pulver to provide a constant supply of kosher meat to the few who wanted it.⁸

Prior to the emancipation of slaves in 1834, meat had been slaughtered by slaves, many of whom had been brought by the Dutch from the Dutch East Indies. Some of these were Muslims who, like the Jews, required their meat to be ritually slaughtered.⁹ Already by the 1770s Islamic prayer meetings were being held and children were being taught Islam - the first madrassah opened in a warehouse in Dorp Street in 1793 by Tuan Guru on his release from Robben Island. The following year he obtained the property for a mosque and four years later was granted permission to erect a mosque. That mosque is still in use.

In 1804 the Batavian Republic, through Governor de Mist, established freedom of worship but it was not until 1841 that there were sufficient Jews for the first Jewish minyan to be organised and not until 1849 that their first rabbi arrived and a synagogue established.

The Rev Pulver had endless trouble getting kosher meat and when the meat was available, the congregation did not want to buy it. There were no freezers and when there were no customers, the butcher was left with decomposing meat. As a result, butchers were unwilling to provide kosher meat. The Rev Pulver's family, however, needed meat.

'The very prospect of being compelled by circumstances to keep a table that was not strictly kosher was a source of the greatest pain to the good man, who was, above all, an orthodox Jew. On the other hand, the Colonists, from the circumstances of their lives,

could not regard the rigid observance of Jewish ceremony with the same reverence, or attach quite the same importance to it as he did.¹⁰

So the Rev Pulver entered into negotiations with local Muslim butchers, who appreciated his problem and were willing to allow him to kill sheep, but rarely, if ever, a bullock.¹¹ Differences in expectations between the minister and his congregation and problems of money caused tension and the small congregation of thirty men with their wives and families that had originally welcomed Mr Pulver started to shrink.

Frustrated, the Rev Pulver wrote to Chief Rabbi Adler for advice. At the same time, he took the opportunity to ask the Chief Rabbi to find him a position in Australia where there were settled Jewish communities – services had been held there in private homes since the 1820s, their first formal congregation was established in November 1831 by the Rabbi Aaron Levy and the first purpose-built synagogue was built in Sydney in 1844.¹²

Please can I rather go to Australia?

The Chief Rabbi's reply to him was recently discovered in the Jewish Theological Seminary Archives in New York by historian Dr Adam Mendelsohn.¹³ This was a remarkable find because seventy years earlier Chief Rabbi Dr JH Herz had informed Louis Herrman that none of the correspondence between the early Cape Town Jewish community and the Chief Rabbi was extant.¹⁴ This was confirmed fifty years later by John Simon who had investigated the archives of the Chief Rabbinate, the Mocatta Library at University College and the Landau Archives at the Hebrew Library looking for such correspondence and had found that nothing from the period between 1841 and 1885 had survived.¹⁵

It is amazing that the copy of this letter from Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler in Britain to the Rev Isaac Pulver in the Cape Colony has survived in America.

April 12 5610¹⁶

Rev I Pulver

Cape Town

My dear sir,

It was with greatest anxiety that I expected from you particular statements about your reception and the congregational affairs in Cape Town. But though the delay was long, I was the more gratified by the principle points of your letter of December last. I could not but feel the greatest satisfaction from the facts that you have succeeded in finishing and consecrating the synagogue before the yomim tovim, and in convincing nearly all the community of the holiness of the Sabbath and of the duty of its strict observance.

I therefore highly regret with you, that the political agitation¹⁷, which prevailed in your colony during the last months, has thrown a general disharmony into the general unanimity of our brethren, and threatens to prevent the steady progress of the congregational welfare. Under these circumstances it is my most anxious wish, that a reconciliation agreeable with Mr Norden (whose influential example is, I confess, of the highest weight, may be effected); and the same way as I expect, you will make your most decided exertions in order to produce that desirable result, I shall not omit any

possible effort in my power to contribute to that aim, for which I have already begun the first steps, and which I shall earnestly prosecute.

With the same regret I deplore the difficulties you find in providing the congregation with a proper shechitah. But it has always been the glory of our faith, that its followers have not been deterred by difficulties however unsurmountable [sic] they might appear. You will as little destroy one of the pillars of Judaism, as I can give my sanction to it; and therefore I hope you will not be discouraged, if I do not allow [you] to use the meat killed by the Malay Priest under any circumstances which is against the mitzvah chaf-vav-lamed-yud-nun.¹⁸ But on the other hand there is no objection to allow the Malay Priest to say whatever formula he pleases provided that you will perform the shechitah according to our rite. Perhaps you may succeed on making an arrangement on this basis.

It is with great pleasure that I acquaint you that a subscription in aid of the funds of your congregation has been prepared here by Mr De Pass and that the amount will be transmitted to your wardens as soon as it may have led to a certain result.¹⁹

Although the office at Sydney is not yet occupied, I hope you will not abandon your present situation - even if there is more prospect for you to obtain the situation at Sydney than there really is - as you must feel that your leaving Cape Town would bring a dangerous crisis into the whole existence of your congregation, and as I feel convinced, that all the difficulties and the unpleasantness of your position (which, I hope, may have considerably decreased by the happy termination of the political differences in your colony) will be removed with the aid of G-d and with the moral courage on your part, which boldly looks at difficulties, when great and holy aims are to be reached.

With my most fervent wishes for the welfare of your congregation especially, which may flourish and joyfully grow under the protection of the Almighty, and of the whole colony in general.²⁰

Accordingly the Rev Pulver made arrangements with the Malay Priest and when he managed to slaughter an ox or a sheep he informed the handful of congregants that he knew would be interested in buying some kosher meat. That caused more trouble because those who had not been offered a supply felt slighted and complained to the committee. The committee asked for a written explanation.

The Rev Pulver explained that he had made the arrangements with the Muslim butcher because he could not get a regular supply of meat from the butchers with whom the congregation had negotiated as they had complained that the kosher meat remained unsold.

Offended that the Rev Pulver had made his own arrangements unilaterally, the committee ordered him to visit every married member of the community to get them to sign a document promising that for a year they would buy kosher meat only. The indignity of going door to door to force his community to buy kosher meat – the humiliation of going to each member to beg them to carry out a practice that as Jews should have been automatic – was too much for the Rev Pulver. He refused.

The committee fined him ten shillings and threatened to suspend him from his office.

Against his will the Rev Pulver prepared a document.

We, the undersigned members of the Jewish community in Cape Town do hereby bind ourselves to take cosher (sic) meat for Twelve months commencing from the date hereby from

in order to enable the Vestry to enter into a contract for the regular supply thereof

Cape Town

Cape of Good Hope.²¹

He took it to all the married members of the congregation. The result could have been predicted.

Signed: A de Pass, Phyllis Sloman, S Rudolf, RJ Joseph, B Jacobs, A Alexander

Remarks: Mrs Wolff will take cosher meat but will not bind herself without the consent of Mr Wolff who is absent from town

Mrs M Hart will take meat but will not sign any document

Mr J Mosenthal refused to sign

Mrs S Marcus will give no answer

Mr N Moss, no answer.²²

Then the President and secretary complained that the Rev Pulver had not gone to them to ask for their signatures. The Rev Pulver explained that he had not thought it necessary seeing that they were the ones who had given him the order.²³

For the Rev Pulver this pettiness was the last straw. The following week he handed in his resignation. He had been in Cape Town for two years. In his letter of resignation, he stated his complaints clearly.

“My principal reasons for wanting to leave this congregation are first, that I cannot get kosher meat, secondly that I cannot as a Jewish parent bring up my children in a place where so little regard is paid to the principles of our Holy Religion; and thirdly, that, notwithstanding nearly two years’ trial to live as economically as possible, I could not make my income meet my expenses,”²⁴

The Congregation, in self-righteous indignation and in the knowledge that they would have to face the wrath of the all-powerful British Chief Rabbi, and also suspecting that the Rev Pulver had already written to the Chief Rabbi, tried to defend itself against his complaints. After the Rev Pulver had left they sent a letter to the Chief Rabbi in which they stated that

June 1851

In consequence of no reply having been received from the Revd J Pulver in answer to a letter of the General Meeting dated 15th June 1851 in answer to his of the 12th Inst. respecting the three separate reasons given for his resignation, it was resolved that the following record be entered in the minutes

To the first that 'I cannot get kosher meat, The Vestry in reply state that Mr Bindemann of the Shambles No 2 was willing to allow the Shochet to kill at his shambles for 12 months conditionally that the community takes meat for said period - Mr Van Reenen of Shambles No 3 was willing to allow the Shochet to Slaughter the whole of his cattle if the same was done - at 5 'o clock in the morning instead of 11 'o clock as heretofore.

To the Second Reason, that "I cannot bring up my Children in a place were (sic) so little regard is paid to the Holy Religion", The Vestry is desirous of recording the following facts –

That they commenced operations(sic) are in order to support and establish in this Colony the Holy cause of the religion of their forefathers whom at no time did their number consist of more than 20 members the greater part of which were single men. Yet the following was the result of their labours.

"They purchased a Burial Ground and erected a Stone wall around it at own expense of £400. They built a maltar(sic) house which cost £110 -, purchased the Synagogue which cost £800 – put on a new roof at an expense of £200, fitting up the Synagogue £150.0.0, Furniture £40 and Sundry Charities £100.

The above expenditure of £1800 has been met by the few members before referred to, with no other papible (sic) reason but that of establishing the cause of their Holy Religion.²⁵

They also justified the meagre stipend their minister had received by pointing out that in addition to his salary of £100, The Rev Pulver had received as donations his tailor's bill of £15, his hatter's bill of £1/13s, a donation of three-month's rent from B Norden Esq. plus occasional stores. As a good-will gesture they agreed to donate £25 towards his travelling expenses and his supporters contributed as well.

Rev Pulver agreed to continue with his duties until their departure some months later and conducted the first Jewish marriage in a South African synagogue, that between Isaac Saul Solomon, tailor and Frances Amelia Sloman.²⁶ It is of interest that Frances Amelia's mother was one of those prepared to bind herself to purchasing "cosher" meat.

The Rev Pulver also conducted the 1851 Rosh Hashanah services but his resignation caused such ill feeling that the small congregation held two separate services.

One service was conducted in the synagogue - but had no minister.

One service had no synagogue - but was conducted by a minister.

To Melbourne – at last

As for the Rev Pulver, he then moved to Melbourne with his family and became assistant minister to the Rev Moses Rintel. It was a good move. He was well accepted and when a new synagogue was planned two years later in Bourke Street, he was asked to serve on the Building

Committee. By 1854 there were complaints in the community that the supply of kosher meat was not adequate – is it unreasonable to suspect the complaints emanated from the Rev Pulver? – and the committee decided to appoint a suitable person as *shochet*. The person appointed was the Rev Pulver from 16 October 1854 at a salary of £250 per annum. This was double his 1851 Cape Town salary where far more had been expected of him (although they had paid for his hats and suits).²⁷

And the Rev Pulver, who had left Cape Town because of his principles and the pettiness of the community, could keep a kosher table and bring his children up with regard to the principles of the Holy Religion.

In 1853 Rev Rintel proposed to the Synagogue Board that they ask Chief Rabbi Dr Adler to set up a Bet Din consisting of himself and the Rev Isaac Pulver. The proposal was turned down but when the Reverend Samuel Herman arrived in February 1864 the Chief Rabbi created an Australian Beth Din in Melbourne comprising of the Rev M Rintel, the Rev Pulver and the Rev Herman.²⁸

After five years as shochet, the Rev Pulver resigned to become the second reader and secretary of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation's school. With three ministers, the kosher meat supply was ensured and he no longer needed to slaughter the meat himself. The following year he served on a School Board to consider opening a Jewish day school and he started services in St Kilda, a suburb in Melbourne where many new Jewish immigrants were settling.

In 1871 he moved onto Tasmania to become minister of the Hobart Hebrew Congregation where he died two years later, aged 70.

The Rev Pulver had left Cape Town for three reasons – he could not get kosher meat, he could not as a Jewish parent bring his children up in a place where so little regard was paid to the principles of Judaism and he could not come out on his salary. In Melbourne he was able to fulfil all his requirements. He was able to get kosher meat, his salary was considerably increased and his children were brought up with a thorough knowledge of Judaism.



Indeed his Australian-born son Louis (left) in due course became the headmaster of the East Melbourne Hebrew School where he served for seven years before moving to Sydney as headmaster of the Sydney Jewish Day School from 1885 –1896. Louis Pulver was described as 'a heaven born instructor of youth'.

When he died he was described in a poem published in the *Jewish Herald* as

... Mourn we today, A greater loss doth fill
Our hearts with grief. Gone is the presence kind -
The teacher, rarely gifted to instil
The love of G-d in childhood's budding mind
Who from the mouth of babe and suckling strove
To stablish strength in Jacob's southern tents...²⁹

It is a pity that the fledgling community in Cape Town could not offer the facilities or the supportive environment to enable it to benefit from this learned man and his son. It is also of interest to see the degree of co-operation and friendship that existed in 1841 between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Cape Town.

The Chief Rabbi had predicted that a 'dangerous crisis into the whole existence of (the Cape Town) congregation' would result from the departure of the Rev Pulver and he was right. For a period it looked as though the hope of Tikvath Israel would disintegrate entirely. The Chief Rabbi waited another seven years before suggesting it was time the congregation found itself another minister and in 1859 he sent out the Rev Joel Rabinowitz. Either the community had learnt something, or it was a better match because the Rev Rabinowitz was to serve the Tikvath Israel congregation for 23 years. He also consecrated the first purpose-built synagogue in Cape Town in 1863, now the Jewish Museum, which was designed in an Egyptian style by an architect called Mr Hogg

It is of interest that the first purpose-built synagogue in Australia, the York Street Synagogue in Sydney, consecrated in 1844, was also described as 'a very pleasing structure of the Egyptian Order'³⁰ and that the Australian synagogues built in the 1840s in Hobart, Launceston and Adelaide were likewise built in the distinctive Egyptian style of architecture.³¹

It is not known whether the Rev Pulver was asked for advice when his former congregation was planning its own purpose-built synagogue.

1 I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable help in accessing material for this article: Dr Ute ben Yosef of the Jacob Gitlin Library, Larry Rubinstein and Michael Rubinstein of Australia

2 Simon, J, "The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation: The Early Years, 1841-1937" in CABO, Vol5 No 2 1991, 19

3 Tatz, Colin, Arnold, Peter & Heller, Gillian, *World Apart: The Re-migration of South African Jews*, 2007, Rosenberg, NSW, Australia, 242 Small wonder that when the Eastern European Jews arrived later that century they refused to accept his authority and selected their own East European Rabbis

4 Herrman, Louis, *The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation 1841-1941, A Centenary History*, 13 -26

5 Abrahams, Israel, *The Birth of a Community: A History of Western Province Jewry from Earliest Times to the end of the South African War, 1902*, Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, Cape Town 1955.,5

6 Herrman, . 21

7 Herman., 49

8 Herman., 6

9 The first Muslims had been brought out as slaves in 1657 by Jan van Riebeeck although the pre-existing proclamation of Van Diemen prohibiting the public practice of Islam on pain of death was reinforced and orders instituted in 1685 by Commissioner Mydrecht that slave children instructed in the Christian religion. When prestigious Muslim political prisoners from Java, Batavia were exiled to the Cape in 1694 they were granted land in Faure and started to teach Islam to slaves and fellow prisoners.

10 IHerman, 26

11 Herman, 136

12 Rutland, Suzanne D, *Edge of the Diaspora: Two centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia*, Collins Australia, 1988, 26-30

13 I would like to thank Prof. Howard Phillips of the History Department, University of Cape Town, for making a copy of this available to me.

14 Herrman, L, *A History of the Jews in South Africa From The Earliest Times To 1895*, Johannesburg. Victor Gollancz, London, 1930, 128

15 Simon, John., " New Archival Material relating to the Early Development of South Africa's Jewish Coommunity: Some preliminary observations"., In *Waters Out Of The Well: Essays in Jewish Studies*, Reuben Musiker & Joseph Sherman (Eds), University of Witwatersand, Johannesburg, 1988, 290

16 1850

17 The political agitation to which he was referring was the *Neptune Affair*, a boycott imposed to prevent the British from landing convicts in Cape Town as was done in Australia. Benjamin Nordern provided the unfortunate convicts with provisions at his own expense for a month. He was stoned by a mob and never recovered from his injuries. A police guard had to be stationed outside the synagogue.

18 The mitzvah of chaf-vav-lamed-yud-nun refers to "chulin" which means the kosher slaughter of animals for non-holy purposes (eg consumption) as opposed to "kodshim": which refers to the kosher slaughter of animals for holy purposes (eg sacrifices). Rabbi D . Maizels, personal communication, 19.11.2007

19 Money had been collected in London for the synagogue. This was used to offset the price of Rev Pulver's ticket ,Herrman, 32

20 Copybook of Nathan Adler (ARC 5, 3/1) in the Jewish Theological Seminary Archives in New York

21 From enlarged mounted copy in the collection of the Jewish Board of Deputies from the old Jewish Museum, Cape Town.

22 Ibid

23 Herrman,, 1930,,171-174

24 Herrman, 1941., 26

25 From enlarged mounted copy in the collection of the Jewish Board of Deputies from the old Jewish Museum, Cape Town.

26 Abrahams, 135

27 Solomon, Isidor, The Pulvers, in Australian Jewish Historical Journal, Vol 3, Part 1, 1949 pp 28-36

28 Rutland, 74. Solomon said the Melbourne Beth Din was established in 1866 , Solomon, .²⁹

29 Solomon, 36

30 Rutland, 29

31 Rutland, 32