

BIOGRAPHY

RABBI MOSES CHAIM MIRVISH

(1872 - 1947)

Moses Chaim Mirvish was born in the small Lithuanian village of Baisagola, in December 1872.^{1,2} He was the son of Joseph Ze'ev Mirvish (born c. 1845) - a miller and grain-merchant - and Tzivia (or Pese) (c. 1850 - 1917), and the grandson of Hirshel Mirvish (born c. 1815). He was one of seven children: four sisters and a brother emigrated to the United States in the 1890's, while another sister died in the Holocaust.

He studied for the Rabbinate, first at Slobodka Yeshiva, and later at the Yeshiva of Telz (Telsiai)³ - in those days, the most famous yeshiva in Lithuania. His teachers there were the Head of the Yeshiva, Rabbi Eliezer Gordon, Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch, and Rabbi Eliezer Shkop. At the end of his studies, he received his Rabbinical Diploma or '*Smicha*' from Rabbi Gordon, and from Rabbi Shmuel Avigdor Feivelson of Plunge (Plungian).¹ In Plunge, he married Seine Margolis (1871-1941), and founded a Hebrew School there, run on modern lines.

In 1908 he emigrated with his family to Cape Town, Cape Colony, South Africa. En route from Lithuania via Bremerhaven (Hamburg), they stayed for four days at the Jews' Temporary Shelter in Leman Street, London, from 5 Sept 1908 (the Shelter records indicate that their entire assets were just 20 Pounds), before leaving from Southampton for Cape Town on 11 September 1908, aboard the *S.S. Dover Castle*.⁴

Rabbi Mirvish was brought to South Africa to be the minister of the Cape Town Orthodox Hebrew Congregation (the *Beth Hamedrash HaChodesh*), then sited in the Constitution Street Synagogue in District Six, in the old centre of town. Like him, most of its members had originated in Lithuania, and many lived close to the synagogue itself. It was significant that, arriving in Cape Town on the eve of Yom Kippur in 1908, he based his first sermon or *drushe* on the text '*I was a stranger in a strange land*' (Exodus II:22).

He was the first fully qualified rabbi (with *Smicha*) in the entire Cape Colony.⁵ His arrival there coincided with a period of turmoil, with the community and the country still recovering from the disastrous effects of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. As the *South African Jewish Times* (29 August 1947) wrote:

'One of the greatest difficulties confronting him was that the bad times which succeeded the Boer War prevailed throughout the country. He soon, however, managed to bring new life into the Congregation in the old Synagogue in Constitution Street, forerunner of that in Vredehoek.'⁶

The Cape Town Jewish community had been officially established in 1841, by English and German immigrants, but from the 1880's onwards there was a large-scale settlement of Lithuanian Jews (or *Litvaks*). The Constitution Street Synagogue was the most Old-Worldly and Lithuanian of the three main Cape Town communities (in Roeland Street, Gardens, and Constitution Street), but also the most orthodox, and the least affluent. In its annual synagogue accounts for the period 1 Nov 1909 - 1 Nov 1910, for example, Rabbi Mirvish's annual salary was given as 93 Pounds (though this had risen to 116 Pounds a year later).⁷ In 1939 the community moved from Constitution Street to a new, purpose-built synagogue -

the Vredehoek Synagogue - built in the *art decor* style on the lower slopes of Table Mountain.

In their book *The Jews of South Africa*, Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz describe the particular atmosphere in the Constitution Street synagogue - a small piece of Lithuania recreated in Africa - and how it differed from other Cape Town congregations of the time:

'On entering the Beth *Hamedrash*, one became conscious of a pervading atmosphere totally alien to that of the other two synagogues. Heavy much-thumbed tomes of the Talmud lay strewn along the long tables. To be shaven was almost as serious a breach of decorum as to enter a synagogue with the head uncovered.'⁸

Despite this East European atmosphere, until 1910 the Cape was still a Colony, administered by a Governor on behalf of the British Crown. On 11 December 1909, Rabbi Mirvish was given a Commission by Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson, Governor of the Cape of Good Hope Colony, as a Marriage Officer, empowering him:

'to solemnise Marriages between persons professing the Jewish faith, in the Division of the Cape'

but requiring him also to ensure that:

*'in the solemnization of all marriages you do confirm to the provisions of the Seventh Section of the Order of Her Majesty the Queen in Council of the 7th September, 1838, relative to a declaration made and words to be spoken during the ceremony, and that you do also conform to so much of the Twenty-first Section of the said Ordinance as is not repugnant to the laws and customs observed among Jews.'*⁹

Within the context of the growing *Litvak* community in Cape Town, Rabbi Mirvish was a crucial figure not only in his own congregation, but also in the development of the Cape Town community as a whole. During his years as Rabbi of the *Beth Hamedrash HaChodesh*, he was active in wider community affairs, helping to create the basic social and religious structure of the Cape Town Jewish community, and in turn this influenced developments in other parts of the country.^{10, 11} His Obituary in the *Cape Argus* (18 August 1947) noted that:

'There was scarcely any activity in the synagogic, charitable or educational spheres of the Jewish communal life in which he did not play an important part'.¹²

while an article in the *South African Jewish Times* (22 August 1947), describing him as 'the Grand Old Man of the Cape Town Rabbinate', reported that:

"So numerous were Rabbi Mirvish's activities," said a well-known Cape Town communal worker, "that it is easier to mention those with which he was not associated than those with which he was."¹³

For example, he founded the *Beth Din* (Ecclesiastical Court) in the Cape, and for many years was the *Av Beth Din*, and he also founded the Cape Board of Shechitah.^{10, 11} He was one of the founders of the Cape Executive of the Jewish Board of Deputies, and a member of its executive board for many years.⁵ He was a founder of the *Bikkur Cholim* (Sick Relief Society), and a Foundation member of the Jewish Aged Home.¹⁴ He was always an active Zionist - even before leaving Lithuania was active in the pre-Herzl

Chovevei Zion movement - and while in Cape Town became a leader of the Mizrachi movement. The *South African Jewish Times* (29 August 1947) noted that:

'History was made by Rabbi Mirvish in 1917, when at a Conference he helped to define South African Jewry's attitude towards the Balfour Declaration.'⁶

While, putting his approach in a wider historical context, his Obituary in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) noted that:

'local Jewry has been deprived of the foremost link joining up three distinct periods in Jewish history. Rabbi Mirvish grew up in the atmosphere of the Talmud, steeped in the life of a self-contained Jewish community long before emancipation came to the countries of Eastern Europe. That was the first phase. He lived through the period of Haskalah, which witnessed a fundamental change in Jewish outlook. When he arrived here some 39 years ago, the Zionist movement (the third phase) was in its beginnings, and he not only displayed the greatest interest in its progress but unhesitatingly offered it his whole-hearted and substantial support. Rabbi Mirvish's life was, therefore, part of the very essence of more than one historic episode in our modern history and this, coupled with his virile leadership, explains why he was so universally popular.'¹⁵

Always active in education,^{5,15} he was Chairman of the United Hebrew Schools in the Cape, founded a Talmudical study group for the young, and was an examiner of Talmud Torah's in both Cape Town and its hinterland. After the First World War, he was active on the committee for the assistance of Jewish War & Pogrom victims from Eastern Europe.

In his overall impact on the South African community, Rabbi Mirvish was a human bridge between the two cultures: the old world of European, particularly Lithuanian Judaism - and the new realities of South Africa, especially within the Cape. He was someone who mediated between these two realities, a living catalyst in the birth and development of the South African Jewish community. His son Dr Louis Mirvish, in an article in *Jewish Affairs* (Vol. 15, No. 5, May 1960), has described how his father had to solve a whole set of problems in this new, South African setting:

'It is not easy for a later generation to realise the legal and practical difficulties which arose in this new land, and which my father was called upon to solve. As a pioneer in his field he was conscious that every step was a precedent. Problems connected with divorce, marriage, proselytism, *chalitzah* and burial, arose daily and had to be tackled in a practical manner. Jewish religious life had to be adjusted to the conditions of the new country - and there were no precedents.'¹⁶

After his death, a special Editorial in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) noted that:

'Although Rabbi Mirvish devoted himself primarily to his congregation and particularly to the learned orthodoxy in our midst, nevertheless his beneficent influence stretched out to all section of the community. For he was not only a great scholar but also a leader and a man of action. His scholarly ability was true to the old rabbinic style - he was exceptionally well acquainted with '*Shas*' and its commentaries - and in addition he was possessed of an extensive knowledge of Haskalah and modern literature. To this wealth of knowledge was added a progressive approach to communal life and he imbued the activities of his community with something of his own spirit.'¹⁵

At various times, this progressive, more open approach to the realities of communal life, were at variance with those of his own congregation.

During his lifetime, Rabbi Mirvish was one of the few South African rabbis known of abroad, and was listed in an international directory of rabbis, published in 1912.¹⁷ But as well as his many, local communal activities, he was also widely known - both in South Africa, and abroad - through his writings. In addition to contributing to many journals, he wrote two important books: both compilations of his sermons, essays, homiletics, Biblical commentaries, and Halachic *Responsa*.⁵ Both of them were written in Hebrew and published in Jerusalem, and each had a Foreword by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate. The first was *Zichron Yakov* ('In Memory of Jacob'), published in 1924, and named after his son Jacob - a poet and pharmacist - who had died tragically in the Influenza epidemic of 1918. The second was *Drushei HaRamach* - ('Sermons of HaRamach' - an acronym of 'HaRav Moshe Chaim'), published in 1935. Both books - but especially the second - dealt with the particular problems of South African Jewry, and of how to adapt the beliefs and practices of traditional East European Judaism to this totally new environment. An Editorial in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947), noted that:

'His *droshim* (sermons) are of a special type, combining the outlook of the Haskalah period with the old type of *droshes* - a task to which very few indeed were equal. It is this remarkable bridge between the old and the new which gave his published works such value and which led to there becoming books of reference for many orthodox Rabbis of today.'¹⁵

During his lifetime, his two books were widely circulated among Rabbis in many other countries. Today, copies are owned by the British Library, the Library of Congress, and the Harvard Judaica Collection.

In the 1920's and 1930's he carried on an extensive correspondence with rabbis and communal leaders in many parts of the world, including Russia, Eastern Europe, Palestine, Great Britain, and the USA. The collection of over 200 letters - now housed in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Cape Town Library¹⁸ - dealt with communal, Rabbinical and Halachic issues, but also with the condition of Jewish communities of Eastern Europe after the privations of the First World War. The collection includes letters to him from Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook of Palestine, Chief Rabbi J.H. Hertz of Great Britain, Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog of Ireland (and later of Palestine), Rabbi Salis Daiches of Edinburgh, Rabbi I. L. Bloch, Head of the Telz Yeshiva, the Rabbinical Council of Warsaw, and Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan of Radun (the '*Chafetz Chayim*'). As well as providing an insight into Jewish religious thinking at that time, many of these letters also offer a unique glimpse of the social and economic conditions of Jewish communities of the time - especially those in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Palestine.

In 1930 - together with Rev. Bender of Cape Town, Rabbi Dr J.L. Landau of Johannesburg, and Advocate M. Alexander MP - he represented the South African Jewish community in a delegation to Parliament, which was considering a Bill which might have outlawed *Shechitah*. As a result of their representations, the Bill was withdrawn.¹⁹

Rabbi Mirvish worked as a congregational Rabbi, right to the very end. On the 17 August 1947, he collapsed and died on the steps of the Vredehoek Synagogue, after officiating at a wedding.²⁰ That evening he had been scheduled to preach at the *Beth Hamedrash* memorial service in honour of the 15,000 Jews killed by the Nazis in Ponevez (Panevzys) on 24 August 1941.¹³

Some months after his death, the street alongside the Synagogue was renamed '*Rabbi Mirvish Avenue*' by the City Council.^{10, 11} According to an article in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* later that year, this street was then the only one in South Africa named after a rabbi.

Saron and Hotz, in their *The Jews of South Africa*, describe him as 'a learned and pious rabbi from Lithuania.'⁸ He was, as the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) put it:

'an eloquent and inspiring speaker who, in private life was loved and admired for his piety and personal integrity. He was an orthodox Rabbi of the old school, but understood the needs and thoughts of the young.'⁵

But from all contemporary accounts, it is clear that he was not only a gifted Rabbi, teacher, scholar and communal leader - he was also, by all accounts a *zadik*, a holy man, someone of great compassion and human tolerance. As Dr C. Resnekov wrote, in appreciation of him in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* of 29 August 1947:

'We cannot evaluate yet the great influence Rabbi Mirvish wielded in the community. As time goes on, we will realise the truth of the Rabbinic saying: "The righteous attain a higher stature in death than when alive," and the Scriptural verse: "The wise shine like the brightness of the firmament and those that lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and aye."

'We may say over Rabbi Mirvish as was said over Rabbi Abina: "Bend your heads, ye palm trees, for a palm tree among men has fallen. Turn the day into night while mourning for him who in search for the light of truth, turned the nights into days."²¹

- Cecil Helman

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Notes

1. *South African Jewish Yearbook: 1920*, edited by N.D. Hoffman (N. Beinkeinstadt, 1920). (Yiddish). Page 93: **Biography of Rabbi Moses Chaim Mirvish.**
2. *Lithuanian Jewry* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Lithuanian Immigrants' Association in Israel, 1967). Page 292: **Baisagola.**
3. *Telsiai Book (The Book of Telz)* (Hebrew), edited by Yitzchak Alprowitz (Tel-Aviv: Organisation of Immigrants from Telz in Israel, 1984), Page 44: **Famous graduates of the Telz Yeshiva.**
4. *Jews Temporary Shelter Records*, Leman Street, London, England.
5. *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) **Death of Rabbi Moses Chaim Mirvish: Great Loss to Cape Jewry.**
6. *South African Jewish Chronicle* (29 August 1947) **Rabbi Mirvish's Work and Personality.**

7. *Statement of Income and Expenditure, Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh, November 1st 09 - 1st Nov. 1910.* (1910) University of Cape Town Library.
8. *The Jews in South Africa: A History*, edited by Gustav Saron & Louis Hotz (Oxford University Press, 1955). Chapter 3: **Cape Town Jewry, 1902-1910**, by Max Geffen, pages 45-58.
9. *Commission by His Excellency the Honourable Sir Walter Francis Hely-Hutchinson*, 11 December 1909.
10. *Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh Annual Report: 1947-1948* (16 June 1948) **The Late Rabbi Moses Chaim Mirvish.**
11. *Cape Town Orthodox Hebrew Congregation* (8 March 1955) **Golden Jubilee Souvenir Brochure.**
12. *Cape Argus* (18 August 1947) **Obituary: Rabbi M.C. Mirvish**
13. *South African Jewish Times* (22 August 1947) **Death of Rabbi M. Ch. Mirvish: Moving Grave-side Tributes.**
14. *South Africa. Jewish Times* (5 July, 1946) **Palatial Old Age Home in Cape Town: Opening Ceremony Arouses Great Enthusiasm.**
15. *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) **Editorial: Cape Jewry Bereaved.**
16. *Jewish Affairs* (May 1960) **Cape Town Jewry in 1910**, by Louis Mirvish, pp. 4-8.
17. *Ohele-Schem: Biografien und Adressen d. Rabbiners: Europa, Asien, Africa, America und Ustralien*, (International Directory of Rabbis) (Hebrew), by Sch. N. Gottlieb (Pinsk, Russia, 1912), Page 511: **Biography of 'Rabbi Mozes Ch. Mirwisch'.**
18. *University of Cape Town Library, Manuscript Collection* (Ref. No. BC 1063), **Rabbi M. Ch. Mirvish**
19. *Cape Town Hebrew Congregation: A Centenary History: 1841-1941*, by Louis Herrman (1941). Page 129.
20. *Cape Times* (18 August 1947) **Sudden Death of Veteran Cape Town Rabbi.**
21. *South African Jewish Chronicle* (29 August 1947) **The Late Rabbi Moses Chaim Mirvish: An Appreciation by Dr C. Resnekov.**