

**Eulogy by Rabbi Dr John Levi AM
at the State Funeral for
The Right Hon Sir Zelman Cowen AK
Temple Beth Israel, St Kilda, Melbourne
13 December 2011**

By tradition a Jewish funeral is simple. Each human being is made in the image of God. Each coffin is of plain wood and is covered by a plain black pall. The emblems of some of those extraordinary achievements of the man have been placed by the coffin for the family and the nation to treasure in all the years to come.

Tradition has chosen most of the words that belong to this service. Most are those from the 3000 year old book of psalms. Emotions do not change. These are words that speak to us of shared experiences of life.

We understand that the life of every person is unique and therefore there is a eulogy ..a hesped in Hebrew..Sir Zelman , Zalman ben Dov Hakohen v'Sarah understood this and was determined that this service would reflect his passions and his love of life. He thoughtfully chose each piece of music and its place in this service. We have heard from his beloved Mozart the Adagio from the Clarinet Concerto We shall hear J S Bach's Sarabande for unaccompanied violoncello from suite no1 and, following the final prayer, the Grand Toccata from the

Fifth Organ Symphony by Widor. ..quite deliberately chosen to leave us with a sense of triumph. The job is done.

Looking down I see the seat on my left in which he sat.

Anna and he were married in this synagogue on 7 June 1945 , sixty six years ago. His father Bernard Cowen was president of this congregation. His father in law Hymie Wittner was its treasurer throughout the congregation's formative years. How proud they would have been.

Family is the great theme, the dynamic centre of the life of Sir Zelman.

Our deepest sympathy is extended to Lady Cowen, to Yoseph , (Nic) who is in Jerusalem and who said farewell to his father two weeks ago, to Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen and to Miriam , to Kate, to Ben and Lahra . To his remarkable sisters June and Shirley and to the grandchildren each one of whom were precious and deserve to be mentioned by name...Sruli, Ruchi, Chaim, Rivki, Sholom Ber, Malkia, Nechama, Moshe, Nechamie, Sarah, Meir, Ella, Nina , Mitch, Charlotte and Alexandra and six great grandchildren.

Of course we know we are in the presence of greatness and that is reflected within this congregation. Her Excellency the Governor General Quentin Bryce, the Rt Honorable the Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the Rt Honorable Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott, Chief Justices, Judges, Governors, Three former prime ministers, Members of Federal and State parliaments, members of the diplomatic corps,

members of the clergy of all faiths and a host of personal friends from every walk of life.

Within this service booklet is a slightly edited biographical note written by Sir Zelman for the second edition of his book "Isaac Isaacs" published by the University of Queensland Press eighteen years ago.

In preparation for this time I reread his remarkable book on Australia's first Governor General and also his autobiography "The memoirs of Zelman Cowen: A Public Life" published by Melbourne University's Miegunyah Press in 2006.

Sir Zelman speaks to us in both books. He writes of Sir Isaac :
"As a young man , I saw him from time to time in Melbourne places, and on one occasion I talked briefly with him, if talk be the appropriate word to describe what took place in an encounter between an awestruck boy and an eminence whom the boy viewed as a colossus. As an Australian Jew, I had a special interest in the life and work of a fellow Jew who, with no assistance beyond his own abilities, made for himself a brilliant career in the law and public life of this country.' ..I did not then know that the Governor Generalship was to link me with Isaacs. As I have said, he was the first Australian born holder of the office. I was the sixth. Ten years after the book was published in 1967, I was invited by the Prime Minister, Mr Malcolm Fraser, to come to see him in Canberra, and he then proposed that my name should go forward to the Queen for appointment as successor to Sir John Kerr as Governor General. Among the thoughts which

crowded into my mind was the one that it was an extraordinary thing that I should have been a biographer of Isaacs. “

Both Isaac Isaacs and Zelman Cowen had powerful mothers. Isaacs had no sense of humour. Sir Zelman was the opposite. Early on in his autobiography Sir Zelman tells one of his favourite stories concerning his aunt Annie who lived in Newcastle on Tyne in England and who, in old age, found herself in hospital. The hospital gravely told her son Sam that his mother was hallucinating. His mother had responded to a number of simple questions by saying she did not know. She was then asked if she would tell them something she did know. The old lady answered decisively in her foreign accent ‘My nephew is the Governor General of Australia’. Asked again , she repeated the bizarre statement. Her son listened to this evidence of hallucination and said simply ‘ Well, it is true’ After that Sam said “They could not do enough for us”.

Some of us may remember a half hour television interview made in 1990 as his battle with Parkinson’s was just beginning.

He recalled growing up in a home where Jewishness was quite central. He sang in the choir of the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation. He vividly recalled his first day at the St Kilda Park Primary School and gazing at the blackboard and thinking he would never make sense of the squiggles that formed the letters of the alphabet. He was amazed when he became first in the State at the conclusion of his primary education.

In his final school year he sat for Matriculation Hebrew. That year he was the only student to do so and of course he passed.. He had wanted to go to Geelong Grammar but Dr Darling insisted that all students attend Chapel and his parents had rebelled and so instead he went to Scotch. He excelled at school and then he said he found the university a place of great richness and the library became his sanctuary . As he wrote he thought to himself “I am the most fortunate of boys”.

He volunteered for military service before the war began. In his own words “Hitler had to be stopped”. But they sent him back to finish his degree and he won the Supreme Court Prize and topped the Final Honours list and then he joined the Navy. In 1943 he met Anna Wittner at a wedding and was smitten He asked her “When you grow up will you marry me? Two years later she did. That bond, that love would only grow deeper. As he said years later” I look at her with wonder” and then his eyes would invariably fill with tears. For anyone who knew Zelman it was indeed the great and inspiring love affair.

But loyalty forms a great part of this story and should be mentioned Significant friendships with the late Senator Sam Cohen, with Paul Freadman, Professor Julius Stone, Sir Ninian Stephens, Robin Sharwood, Sir James Gobbo, Adam Sher, Jim Wolfesohn, ,Samuel Pizar, Ron Castan, Alan Goldberg, Jack Feiginbaum and all the judges from the offices nicknamed the Golan Heights, His driver Steve Smith. Professor Gus Nossel , Steven Skala, Prof Don Markwell and Josh

Frydenberg. There are countless people whose lives he changed as teacher, advisor and mentor.

After the war, after the experience of the bombing of Darwin in 1942 and following active naval service decoding messages in General MacArthur's Headquarters, it was time to activate the Rhodes scholarship he had been awarded in 1940. At Oriel College he became a Bachelor of Civil Law ...teaching and studying and becoming a Fellow of Oriel College. He called it "a defining moment". He dreamed of teaching law in Australia and of charting new legal boundaries that would suit the land of his birth. He became a frequent voice of the radio commenting on the news...He told me he loved giving speeches He was always travelling and in his autobiography he admits he was called by his students "seldom seen Cowen" and he transformed the Faculty of Law .

He became Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Melbourne the age of 31, an appointment which broke all records throughout the British Commonwealth. In 1967 he astounded his colleagues by accepting the position of Vice Chancellor in New England and not a post at Harvard or Chicago. And after New England he was invited to become Vice Chancellor of the University of Queensland ...those were tumultuous days of huge student protest on issues he felt strongly but which he faced down as a threat to the well being of society itself and liberal democratic values. Later he would say that 'this was the best hour I had' .

But none of us who lived through the years that followed will ever forget the dignity and healing Sir Zelman brought to the office of Governor General .

As he said to Film Australia “My luck has been incredible” but, of course, we know it was never luck. It was pure genius. It was the ability to make friends. It was loyalty to the law and to this land. It was charm. It was profound dignity. It was solid hard work. It was intellectual integrity.

After Canberra , of course, came England and Oriel College and the Press Council of the United Kingdom and honour upon honour. He helped establish the Law School at Griffith University and the National Academy of Music. We are grateful to Richard Divall , Senior Associate for the Centre Australian Music Studies at the University of Melbourne for his help with this service. Sir Zelman served as Chairman of Fairfax newspapers for three years.

He helped write the legal framework of emerging former colonial nations. He deeply cherished his links with Israel and with the Hebrew University and the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem. He took his membership of the Jewish community very seriously. He was patron of a score of organisations and was never just a name on a letter head.

Sir Zelman was a renaissance man ..He loved music and Mozart and Schubert most of all.. He was a captivating teacher. He suffered fools

gladly. Zelman was meticulous. He had a deep sense of what was right and what was wrong. He lived his chosen profession into life. We will hear how there was no frontier between the public and the private man. He had the same values in his private life as in his public life. Could that have been the source of his greatness ? His was a life that evolved, that changed and he dealt with life at every stage and those who loved him most friends and family will always remember how he tackled the last stage of his life with courage and grace. There was never a word a complaint. There was a little obituary notice in the Age which caught my eye. It was from the St Kilda Football Club and it finished with the line “ Farewell Saint Zelman”. He would have liked that.

We have this morning heard from Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen speak on behalf of the family. He quoted from a two thousand year old Hebrew classic called Pirke Avot “The Ethics the teachings of the Fathers” . In Chapter 4 verse 17 we read “Rabi Shimon omer” Rabbi Shimon said, there are three crowns “Keter Torah” the crown of learning, Sir Zelman Cowen was epitome of learning. “Keter K’huna” the crown of priesthood , he bore that crown of his faith with the greatest dignity . ‘v’keter malchut” the crown of royalty- the evidence of that crown lies before us Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George, Knight of the Order of Australia , Privy Councillor. And then, from eighteen hundred years ago, Rabbi Shimon of Pirke Avot added a fourth crown: V’keter Shem Tov oleh al gabayhen “ but the crown of a good name excels them all.” And so it does , even when these children reach the age of 92 (im yirtzeh hashem) God willing, they

will know and understand that the crown of good name excels over all .

May his memory bring blessing.