

A Wild Night in Strathfield

In the late 1980s, the Yeshivah brought Rabbi Immanuel Schochet from Toronto to Sydney. Henry Kinstlinger who was running the project, rang me to ask if I would like to have him speak at Strathfield Synagogue, where I served as rabbi from 1987 to 1992. I confirmed that he would speak on Sunday night for his final talk before leaving. In light of the many Jews for J. in Sydney, we agreed that his topic was to be “Jesus was a Jew but can a Jew Be for J.?” Before the Sunday night talk at Strathfield, Rabbi Schochet had given a talk on the Thursday night to a huge crowd of 600 people at the Hakoah Club. As well, he had been interviewed on a prime time TV show. The Sunday night program at Strathfield followed both the Hakoah talk and the TV interview. At both of these events, the Strathfield talk and the topic were mentioned. “If you wish to hear Rabbi Schochet talk on ..., he will be at Florence Street, Strathfield.” Across the screen there was an advertisement saying “For more information ring ..., followed by our phone number.

Board of Deputies security had rung me to say that this could be quite an explosive topic and we agreed that some undercover security should be planted in the audience. We knew to expect a large crowd, so on Sunday I set up not just the Shul¹ but also the Kindergarten Hall for an overflow viewing on a screen. I remember Henry Kinstlinger on the Sunday afternoon coming to set up the electronics for the overflow. I can remember personally taking apart the mechitza² to allow for more seats in the aisle where the mechitza usually stood. Already Sunday morning we were receiving phone calls from people who were obviously not of the Jewish faith and one lady even asked if I could pick her up by car for the event.

There was no entry fee, but about an hour before people were lining up at the Shul gates with their Bibles in their hands. Many were Jews for J. Because I had introduced Rabbi Schochet and was sitting facing the audience, I remember seeing one Jewish woman who had joined a Christian Hebrews group shaking her head in disapproval throughout his talk. She was as if in a cult and her brainwashed state did not let her even ponder his arguments.

The evening started with Rabbi Schochet speaking calmly but with great confidence and total mastery of the subject matter. Then at a certain point he noted that now he was “taking off his gloves” and the faint-hearted should leave. It was at this point that he really started his demolition of the Jews for J theology. He kept his most aggressive attack for the Christian missionaries preying on Jewish youth ignorant of their own tradition. Inflammatory statements like “I would rather have a Nazi than a missionary” made this an intense evening. During question time, he was utterly in control. Deleted from the original footage is the incident when at one point, one of the missionaries got out of his seat and started walking to the pulpit and was ready to throw a punch. The security boys quickly surrounded him and convinced him to return to his seat. At the end of the talk a group of about twenty people gathered around Rabbi Schochet to ask questions. He was physically very vulnerable at that point, but I noticed that in that group were Board of Deputies security who were less interested in the theological discussion than in being ready to block any punch, in case one be thrown at Rabbi Schochet.

Rabbi Aryeh Solomon
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¹ synagogue

² partition