



Celebration: Rabbi Dovid Gutnick (front) and synagogue president Danny Segal at East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation.

PICTURE: REBECCA HALLAS

# A new spin on an old favourite

A historic synagogue is ready for a relaunch, writes **Barney Zwartz**.

**E**AST Melbourne Hebrew Congregation is a lucky synagogue. Its rabbis have won Tattslotto or its equivalent three times, with the first promptly downing tools and leaving his post.

There is no danger the current rabbi, Dovid Gutnick, will follow in his footsteps — he has never bought a lottery ticket.

But he benefits from some of the synagogue's good fortune — its handsome building and rich history — and is now guiding a new period of growth, as Australia's longest-running synagogue reinvents itself as a Jewish hub for the inner city.

The venerable synagogue, now 155, will enjoy a double celebration on Sunday. In a remarkable coup, Gutnick has persuaded Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Britain and of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, to "relaunch" the synagogue after stage two of its \$1.5 million refurbishment.

And the congregation will also accept two new Torah scrolls, a particularly joyous event.

"The reason the chief rabbi is coming is to relaunch the synagogue from its traditional style to a more contemporary approach," says Gutnick.

Sacks will inscribe the last Hebrew letters on the new scrolls at Queens Hall in Parliament House, after which there will be a colourful procession through the Parliament Gardens to the synagogue in Albert Street, then a festive service in which visiting rabbis and other luminaries will dance around the synagogue holding the scrolls.

Sacks, a noted philosopher as well as respected religious leader, will also address a gala dinner at Crown Palladium on Sunday night.

He is far from the first great name to worship at East Melbourne, although they were not always recognised at the time.

Governors-general Isaac Isaacs and Zelman Cowen had their bar

mitzvahs (the ceremony signifying transition to adulthood that Jews undergo at 13) there.

Isaacs had his in the original 1857 building, which still stands on the corner of Exhibition and Little Lonsdale streets.

In 1877 the congregation moved into the much grander building it still occupies. The East Melbourne synagogue was the original home for the Jews of Carlton, where the Melbourne community was born, before they migrated en masse to Caulfield and St Kilda. Now there are barely a dozen observant Jews left in Carlton, Gutnick says.

East Melbourne's numbers dwindled, he adds, but in the past decade many Jews have moved to live in the city and attendance is growing. The synagogue — in the middle of a hospital precinct, close to Melbourne's sports precinct and right next to the CBD — draws people from those areas and tourists, Jewish or not, Gutnick says.

Services are often interrupted by tourists who wander in and start clicking cameras, but the congregation is tolerant.

"Our biggest congregations are on grand final morning — I don't say where people go when they leave," Gutnick jokes (Orthodox Jews should not be at the MCG on

the last Saturday in September, the Sabbath). Gutnick, the first third-generation rabbi in Australia — his grandfather Chaim and father Mordecai have been noted leaders — boasts a bar mitzvah card signed by the entire Fitzroy team he used to love, including Paul Roos and Gary Pert, "encouraging me to be a son of the commandment".

His task now is to make Judaism attractive to a generation far removed from its roots, while still being faithful to Orthodox practice.

"To become more contempor-

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**4 To become contemporary may be the best way to honour the tradition. 7 DOVID GUTNICK**

ary may be the best way to honour the tradition," he suggests.

"The Hebrew translation of synagogue is not a house of prayer but a house of gathering. Liturgy [the formal worship service] is important, but to engage people in Judaism today it has to be much more broad and diverse."

The congregation holds classes for adults and children to explain the basics of Judaism, a daily lunchtime service for business people and has turned the choir

loft into a library. It hosts 25 visits a year from Melbourne schools.

"We want to get people engaged in their religion in any way that is kosher and relevant, to relate bone fide Judaism to people who have otherwise lost contact," Gutnick says. "That's a stark difference to the way the synagogue used to operate."

One of the relics of the past is a prayer for the royal family mounted in marble on the front wall.

In 1952 the craftsman rubbed out the name George, replacing it with Elizabeth.

He made all the male pronouns female, including, in a rush of enthusiasm, one referring to God.

So in East Melbourne, they pray in an unusually unorthodox way: "May the Supreme King of Kings, through her infinite mercy . . ."

"We didn't even have women on synagogue boards then," Gutnick says. "These days, youngsters would struggle to relate to this at any level."

The royal family may be too big a challenge but the task of making Judaism more accessible has made a solid start.

But, Gutnick confides, "the bulk of the work is still ahead of us".

Barney Zwartz is religion editor.