For five generations of
Family Persoff
with fondest love

Closed Doors: The Chief Rabbi's residence in Hamilton Terrace, North-West London, where many of the religious disputations took place in utmost secrecy

'How good and pleasant it is
to dwell together as brothers in unity.'

Psalms 133:1

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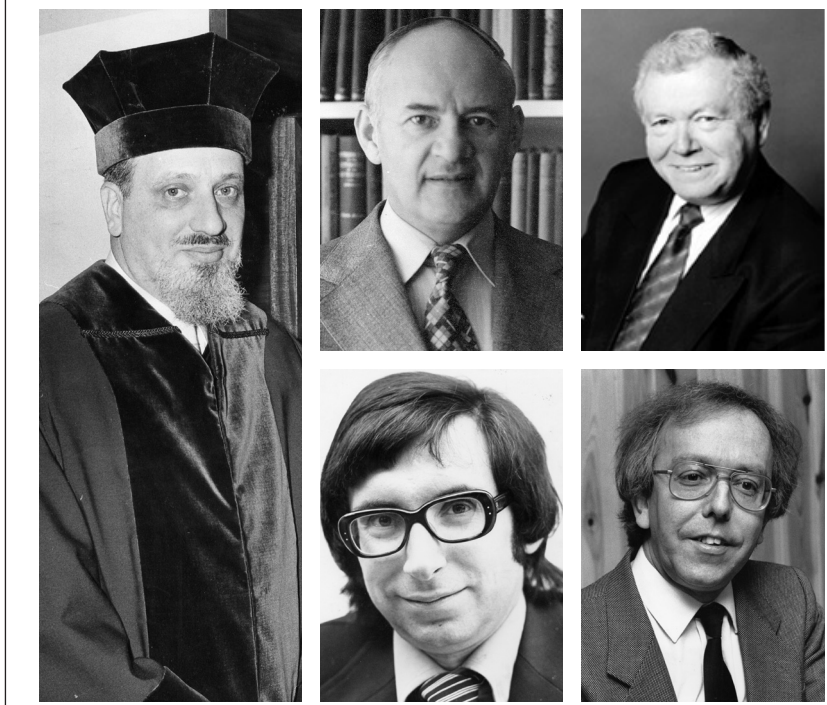

Open Minds: Immanuel Jakobovits and his four main disputants (clockwise from top left), John Rayner (Liberal), Dow Marmur (Reform), Tony Bayfield (Reform), Sidney Brichto (Liberal)

Foreword

In his latest work on the British Chief Rabbinate, Meir Persoff explores uncharted territory in the tenures of Immanuel Jakobovits and Jonathan Sacks and, through exclusive access to personal and other archives, reveals consistent attempts to find common ground within the various strands of Anglo-Jewry. Allied to his forty-year career on the *Jewish Chronicle*, he presents a rare insight into controversial aspects of their work, demonstrating the dilemmas facing them over a range of issues, and leading to the view (posited elsewhere) that the institution of the Chief Rabbinate may have outlasted its usefulness and should cease to exist.

This case, supported by others in the field – and beyond – is not new. As long ago as 1911, in the run-up to the election of Joseph Herman Hertz, it was enunciated by a group of foreign-born, strictly Orthodox rabbis, who argued that the Office of the Chief Rabbi was no longer required, or should never have been established. If examined in purely historical terms, a strong case could well be argued that the position had developed in a society that was changing so dramatically that it was indeed time to seek an alternative.

It is almost universally accepted today that changes within British Jewry over the past two generations have dug deep. One feature of early Anglo-Jewry was the central role played by laymen, above all by the so-called Cousinhood, who between them ran virtually every communal institution until the end of the Second World War. When the last of their number, Ewen Montagu, was succeeded as president of the United Synagogue by Sir Isaac Wolfson, the Glasgow-born son of a Russian immigrant, a forceful signal went forth that Anglo-Jewry had changed.

At one time, debates between the Chief Rabbi and his contemporaries involved almost exclusively the lay leaders of the community, adamant in their belief that it was they, and not their ecclesiastical head, who could – and should – decide which limited areas of authority came under his jurisdiction. The post-war era has produced no lay leaders of comparable strength, and one of the notable features of this book is their relative absence from the disputations taking place.

This is not to say that the lay leaders are unaware of the issues. One of the arguments adduced during the discussions over Lord Jakobovits' successor was the extent to which the successful candidate could bridge the gulf so apparent in the Jewish world. What seemed to be overlooked was that a bridge is there to be walked over.

A forceful development within the community is the growing cohesiveness of the Progressive group, uniting the rabbinates and lay leaders of Reform and Liberal persuasion. The creation of a Reform Beth Din in Britain emerged, to some extent, as a result of opposition to the widespread disunity among American Reform congregations, and testified to a desire to sink their differences, paralleled by the appearance of figures who could be regarded as spokespersons for the group as a whole. Simultaneously, there has been a considerable strengthening of the ultra-Orthodox groups, which have never accepted the pre-eminence of a Chief Rabbi, and were part of the gulf that had to be bridged.

The extent to which there remains a recognisable 'mainstream' within Anglo-Jewry has also been thrown into doubt. The growth of 'alternative' religious groupings of various hues, the issues of female participation in synagogue services and the management of communal institutions, have all gone far towards undermining one of the foundation-stones of the Chief Rabbinate – its financial base.

Early desires to establish the institution on a sound footing coincided with attempts to establish the institution itself. With every vacancy, congregations contributing towards its upkeep were instructed to participate in the election process, and the conflict between the United Synagogue and the Federation of Synagogues revolved as much around this issue as around anything else. But, continually, it was left to the United Synagogue to fund the Chief Rabbinate and the London Beth Din, and in today's climate the parent organisation has found its own financial basis increasingly unsound.

Its membership, moreover, is steadily shrinking. Fewer families now feel the imperative to 'join' a synagogue; in fact, the very religiosity of the community has continued to change. What might in the Brodie era have been described as a cylinder stretching from the ultra-Orthodox to the ultra-non-Orthodox now increasingly resembles a dumbbell, with the two extremes developing at the expense of the middle. With numbers falling, the danger increases that the middle ground will largely disappear, leaving the community irredeemably split. And a growing tendency towards intermarriage poses a further menace.

None of this is new to informed opinion. Early in the Jakobovits era, the Chief Rabbi sought to forge links with involved academics, hoping

to benefit from their broader insights. The establishment of unofficial, and highly confidential, meetings with non-Orthodox leaders – strikingly revealed in this volume – formed another aspect of that endeavour, though it largely failed to achieve its goal. In an earlier work, Dr Persoff explored possible reasons for this failure; indeed, the incumbents are faced with a near-impossible task. Some did not mix in the strictly Orthodox yeshivah world and were thereby unlikely to gain its acknowledgement or support.

When Jonathan Sacks was chosen, he delayed his induction for a year so as to study in Jerusalem with the *gedolim*. His appointment was greeted with enthusiasm by many in the community because of his undisputed reputation as a scholar and publicist, perhaps without recognising that not all of his talent was focused on the Jewish community. In effect, the Chief Rabbi was expected to be all things to all men, even though this would have involved squaring the circle.

Is it therefore accurate, and inevitable, that the Office of the Chief Rabbi has reached the end of its journey? Should the community accept that there is no longer any need of it, and no possibility of finding an ideal incumbent? Paradoxically, it might well be suggested that current divisions within the broad sweep of Anglo-Jewry make the position of the Chief Rabbinate more necessary than ever.

When there was a Lord Rothschild to represent the entire community, and to whom the Government would invariably address important issues; when publication of a major news story could be delayed so as to allow the *Jewish Chronicle* virtual exclusivity, no one thought of consulting the Chief Rabbi. But the disappearance of such lay leadership has thrown into higher prominence the Chief Rabbinical role.

The growing precariousness of Jews within modern society means more than ever that those who recognise their own Jewishness require a leader who can be acknowledged as such. Issues arise – involving shechitah and milah, for example – which are fundamental to many who would not describe themselves as 'fundamentalist'. These are matters on which a Chief Rabbi must give guidance, both to the Jewish community and to the outside world – as did Hertz when he led the fight against the adoption by the League of Nations of a universalist calendar.

Within today's broader Anglo-Jewry, there are enormous differences. But, as Hertz remarked in another context, while we recognise religious differences, more troubling still is religious indifference. It was the Reform rabbi Harold Reinhardt who pushed his congregations towards a degree of unity, having experienced the apparent chaos which had befallen his fellow Jews in the United States.

In these circumstances, it appears that the one Office which might help to instil unity within British Jewry – the Chief Rabbinate – should not be allowed to wither and die. The jury of history is out, and we must await its verdict.

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Preface

In March 1993, a brief report in the London *Jewish Chronicle* drew the public's attention to a communal body that had been kept under wraps for almost a decade. A closed-door 'liaison committee' of prominent Orthodox and Progressive Jews, it disclosed, 'has decided to shed an eight-year-old veil of secrecy in a bid to encourage "respect and tolerance" across doctrinal divides.

> A co-founder of the group – Rabbi Maurice Unterman, emeritus minister of the Marble Arch (United) Synagogue – said that wider communication was essential. 'Human beings who don't speak will always quarrel,' he declared. 'There is too much collective position-taking in Anglo-Jewry and not enough respect, sympathy and communication among individuals.'
>
> The committee, which also includes prominent members of the Masorti, Reform and Liberal movements, was set up with the aim of 'agreeing to disagree amicably' on differences of doctrine, while trying to work for compromise solutions to other problems. 'We are present in individual, not organisational, capacities,' said Jonathan Lew, the United Synagogue's chief executive. 'What has made the arrangement work is the honesty and trust that exist among all of us.'
>
> The main focus of the group – which began in 1985 as an informal response to a series of perceived attacks by a Progressive rabbi on the then Chief Rabbi, Sir Immanuel Jakobovits – has been to take the 'personal sting' out of relations between the various religious groups, one member said. 'We've had successes, partial successes, and failures,' said Rabbi Tony Bayfield, the chief executive-designate of the Reform movement. 'But the attempt has always been to address the real issues without posturing.'[1]

What the report did not reveal – indeed, did not know – was that the 'eight-year-old veil of secrecy' was a good deal older. Closed-door meetings at the Chief Rabbi's residence in Hamilton Terrace, North-West London,[2]

had been taking place almost from the beginning of the Jakobovits Chief Rabbinate, and were to continue, clandestinely, for several years after this revelation was announced.

* * *

As readers of my earlier studies will be aware, intra-communal strife has been a hallmark of Anglo-Jewish life almost from the start of the modern era. Following the rise of Reform in the early 1840s, it dominated relations between the factions for more than fifty years, until a *modus vivendi* (of sorts) was reached towards the end of the century.

Confrontation re-emerged, however, with the founding of the Liberal movement in the early 1900s, exacerbated by growing warfare between the Chief Rabbinate and London Beth Din, on the one hand, and the Progressives – and, much later, the Masorti (Conservatives) – on the other. The arrival of Immanuel Jakobovits as Chief Rabbi in the mid-1960s, after the upheaval of the so-called 'Jacobs Affairs',[3] saw the first solid attempts to calm troubled waters.

In preparing for his role, the future Chief Rabbi had set certain boundaries:

> I believe I can assume that all parties to the recent conflict are by now thoroughly tired of the costly strife, disenchanted with the sterile results achieved, saddened by the bitterness and disunity which have disrupted the once-solid structure of the community, and anxious to find an honourable solution.
>
> For my part, I am prepared to go a very long way in my quest for a lasting reconciliation, based on friendliness and mutual trust, as well as on respect for our sacred traditions. Of course, I realise there will have to be some give-and-take on a few matters of substance, but primarily I think the situation calls for a new outlook and attitude on all sides, the creation of an atmosphere of goodwill, and an amicable 'agreement to disagree' within some well-defined limits.[4]

When, after a short time – despite assurances from all sides of peace and accord – Jakobovits found that the atmosphere was as toxic as ever, he took steps to harmonise relations, first through public means and then, when these failed, by going underground. More precisely, he opened the doors of his home to a select few of the combatants, and then closed them firmly once the parties were inside.

For some twenty years from the late 1960s, and thereafter following a break, representatives of the various orientations held confidential meetings in attempts to bridge their communal and halachic differences. So secret were these contacts that no word reached the outside world until well after they were broken off, and hitherto the details of their often fiery disputations – both verbally and in writing – have never been revealed. This volume opens the doors for the first time on that combative world.

* * *

Within the past year, a report published in London by the Institute of Jewish Policy Research (JPR), in conjunction with the Board of Deputies, noted that the number of households affiliated to synagogues in Britain had fallen by 20% over the previous quarter-century.[5]

Centrist Orthodox synagogues, including those under the Chief Rabbinate, were the biggest losers, shedding more than one-third of their members during that period. While they were the most dominant synagogal group in 1990, representing 70% of shul members (including Sephardim), that number had fallen to 56% by 2016. Non-Orthodox membership, meanwhile, had risen from 26% to 31%.

The report also noted that data from the JPR's community survey of 2013 indicated that 'a significantly higher number and proportion of mainstream Orthodox-affiliated Jews have moved towards more non-Orthodox or Progressive movements than the other way round'.

According to Jonathan Boyd, JPR's executive director and co-author of the report, 'because the more Progressive wing is largely stable, representing just under one-third of the total, the trends point to a future in which stricter forms of Orthodoxy will hold an increasingly prominent position, not only in synagogue membership, but in how Judaism is practised and how Judaism is seen and understood by others'.

Commenting on this trend, Rabbi Danny Rich, chief executive of Liberal Judaism, said that 'mainstream Jewry – and mainstream Orthodoxy in particular – has failed to respond by offering an attractive alternative to the false certainties of fundamentalism. I believe we need to be more open, more inclusive and more flexible.'

In a brief analysis, written for the *Jewish Chronicle*, Boyd commented: 'Belonging to a synagogue matters. More than anything else, it is where we encounter Jewish community and find our place within it. News of continuing decline should wake us up, and prompt us to get involved

to make our synagogues more vibrant, dynamic and purposeful for everyone.'[6]

The survey's findings have a clear bearing on the contents of this volume – and on another report published in 1992, when the United Synagogue released *A Time for Change*, the results of an extensive review conducted under the chairmanship of Stanley (now Lord) Kalms.[7]

The review was set up 'against a background of crisis and opportunity – crisis in the form of declining membership, and opportunity represented by growing interest and participation in Jewish life, as well as the challenge of a new Chief Rabbi. Many possibilities were considered, including the notion that this once-vital lynchpin in Anglo-Jewry was no longer relevant or needed….

'Along with financial malaise, other symptoms were manifest. These included a loss of morale at every tier within the organisation, confused and conflicting approaches to the United Synagogue's objectives, lack of role definition at both a lay and professional level, and, above all, a deep dissatisfaction with the centre.'[8]

Many of these problems were corrected over the years, but at least one remained: the possibility of members leaving the United Synagogue. 'For the non-Orthodox respondents', the Kalms review noted, 'the Masorti and Reform communities were real options. For the reasonably Orthodox, Masorti was a powerful magnet.

'For respondents who consider themselves traditional, many are annoyed by the perceived new-found extremism of the United Synagogue and its unwillingness to develop halachah in the ways that they believe it has been developed over the centuries. For this group, Masorti synagogues are a real attraction, especially those that still retain separate seating for men and women.'[9]

In a section on 'quantitative research' (by questionnaires), the review found that 'about a quarter of those who had considered leaving had done so because of geographical considerations, and the majority of these would move to another United or Orthodox synagogue. If such cases are removed from the analysis, the majority of potential (dissatisfied) leavers would move to the Left – that is, to Reform (35%), Masorti (17%) or Liberal (3%) synagogues, or to no synagogue at all (4%). The remaining 41% would move to another Orthodox synagogue.

'Allowing for the proportion of respondents who have probably never heard of the Masorti movement, the percentage selecting this type of synagogue is surprisingly high. Combined with the Progressive sector, it would seem that the main threat to United Synagogue membership comes

from the Left. The dramatic growth in the Right-wing sector appears to be fuelled mainly by the natural growth of Chasidic communities, and by the attraction of previously unaffiliated Jews, rather than by any sizeable defection from the central Orthodox community.'[10]

Nearly twenty years on, the JPR report noted that, 'while the Orthodox middle has suffered a squeeze, there has been a 139% increase in membership of strictly Orthodox congregations since 1990, and their overall synagogue market had risen from 4% to 13%. The Progressive wing is largely stable and, apart from the strictly Orthodox, the only stream to grow is Masorti, which has more than doubled its membership since 1990 and is no longer the smallest grouping, having overtaken the Sephardim.'

In light of these statistics, the narrative related in the coming chapters assumes contemporary significance. With numbers shrinking in the wider Jewish community, let alone in the congregational establishment, its leaders need to learn the lessons of past disputes and, with open doors and open minds, find new paths to an Anglo-Jewry at peace with itself. One fact appears certain: in terms of size, structure and sympathies, centrist Orthodoxy is on the wane, and another review may be necessary if it is to revive in the coming decades.

* * *

Over some forty years, as a member of the *Jewish Chronicle* editorial staff, I established close contacts – and friendships – across the communal divide. Many were the meetings I had with rabbis, organisational leaders, community workers, academics, fellow journalists, counsellors and politicians, and a host of other professionals and pundits, all as eager to impart as I was to receive.

In the context of my research, they included Chief Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks and, earlier, the late Chief Rabbi Dr Immanuel (Lord) Jakobovits, Haham Dr Solomon Gaon, and Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs, of blessed memory; and from each and all, my storehouse of communal knowledge and interest steadily grew. To me, and to countless others throughout the world, Lord Sacks remains a source of profound inspiration. Week after week, and year after year, he does what he does best – producing teachings and volumes of the highest calibre, enriching the field of Jewish scholarship, and enlightening generations of young and old with words and thoughts that leave one spellbound.

To the late Rabbi Dr Sidney Brichto, I owe much for the mound of material he shared with me, and for the hours we passed discussing the

Jewish world around us. Far above all, I am deeply indebted to the late Lady (Amélie) Jakobovits, who, almost to the day of her passing, encouraged me to continue working in my chosen subject – the relationship between the British Chief Rabbinate and the non-Orthodox movements, in which field her beloved husband was so closely involved.

I extend warm thanks to Nicola Avery, Principal Archivist (Culture, Heritage and Libraries) at London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), and to Mary Cockerill, Archivist at the Hartley Library of the University of Southampton (USL, Archives and Special Collections) for their invaluable assistance in the preparation of this study; and to Rabbi Dr Tony Bayfield and David Jacobs, of Reform Judaism, for their constant advice and support over many years. My early research owes much to Erla Zimmels, librarian of the London School of Jewish Studies (formerly Jews' College), whose help and expertise have proved of inestimable value.

I am also grateful to Professor Aubrey Newman, of the University of Leicester, for so kindly contributing the foreword to this book. He has written extensively in the field of Anglo-Jewish history, most notably provincial Jewry since the eighteenth century, and is the author of the highly acclaimed *The United Synagogue, 1870–1970*. In the late 'eighties, he sat on the seven-man committee responsible for selecting Jonathan Sacks as Chief Rabbi. Now Emeritus Professor of History at Leicester University, he was instrumental in the establishment of its Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and continues his work on modern Anglo- Jewry.

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Jerusalem
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CHAPTER ONE

1945–1960

Strife and Sanctity

British Jewry emerged from the Second World War in a fraught and fragile state. Within months of Victory in Europe (VE) Day – 8 May, 1945 – Chief Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz[1] died, leaving behind a fractured community beset by internecine strife and religious differences, primarily in the fields of marriage, divorce and conversion.

The rise and spread of Reform Judaism throughout much of the nineteenth century, and its Liberal counterpart in the ensuing decades, had led to escalating friction between the Orthodox and Progressive factions, aggravated by Hertz's diminishing authority as failing health, clashes within the United Synagogue hierarchy, and the growing dominance of the London Beth Din, sapped his strength.

As early as 1856, during the Chief Rabbinate of Nathan Marcus Adler, and after considerable disputation between the opposing synagogal bodies, an 'Act to amend the Provisions of the Marriage and Registration Acts' had received royal assent, authorising the Registrar General 'to furnish marriage register books and forms to each certified secretary of the [Reform] West London Synagogue of British Jews,' and of 'some other Synagogue… being in connexion with the West London Synagogue and having been established for not less than one year…. Every marriage solemnised under any of the said recited Acts or of this Act shall be good and cognisable in like manner as marriages before the passing of the first-recited Act according to the rites of the Church of England.'[2]

Eight decades later, the Liberals – until then compelled by statute to have a civil registrar at each of their weddings – similarly sought a marriage secretary of their own. In June 1934, they approached Neville Laski,[3] president of the Board of Deputies, who in turn (as again required by law)

asked Hertz for a ruling that the Liberal congregation was 'a synagogue of persons professing the Jewish religion'. This the Chief Rabbi initially declined to do, until six months later when, after a fiery exchange with United Synagogue vice-president Sir Robert Waley Cohen,[4] he issued the following statement:

> Although I strongly disapprove of the religious practices and principles of the Liberal Synagogue, I am not justified in declaring that its members have left the ranks of Jewry, and do not profess Judaism. If that had been the case, they could not have been given representation on the Board of Deputies.
>
> Moreover, if the recognition requisite for the appointment of a marriage secretary is now denied them, they will, as Berkeley Street [West London Reform] have done years ago, seek relief by Act of Parliament. Such a course would in all probability bring with it a discussion in Parliament of minor religious differences. I feel that such a discussion would be especially undesirable at the present moment.
>
> In the circumstances, I am prepared to agree to the formality of certifying that the body in question is an organisation for purposes of worship and kindred activities on the part of Liberal Jews, and therefore constitutes for the purposes of the Act of Parliament a synagogue of persons professing the Jewish religion.
>
> However, it must be clearly understood that, by this formal act of certification, the Chief Rabbinate can take no responsibility for the legality or otherwise in Jewish law of any ritual act performed by the ministers of that Congregation.[5]

The appointment a year later of Yechezkel Alter Abramsky as senior dayan of the London Beth Din[6] foreshadowed a diametrically different approach to non-Orthodox marriages, heightened by the growing incidence of intermarriage during the Second World War. In this connection, the number of applications for conversions to the West London Synagogue had risen annually from around thirty before the war to more than 100 by its close.[7]

Gone were the days when the Beth Din felt comfortable in passing on to the West London Synagogue would-be converts who wished to marry nominally observant Jews. 'The fact that the gentleman concerned is not a strictly Orthodox Jew,' wrote Dayan Mark Gollop to the Rev Vivian Simmons in 1930, regarding one such case, 'would seem to point to