CHANGE-OVER IN ANGLO-JEWRY

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(Review Article)*


Israel Finestein has been beguiling us for more than half a century with numerous, usually well-researched, essays on aspects of Anglo-Jewish history. They have appeared in a variety of publications and in recent years he has collected many of them, together with previously unpublished work, often updated, in a series of books. Despite the variety of publication occasions, he has aimed, in this latest volume of collections, to provide a theme for them and states at the start of his ‘Preface and Acknowledgements’:

The connecting link between these diverse chapters is what is often called ‘the ceaseless flow of change’. All the characters under consideration were faced with the one certainty in history, namely change. Their responses are part of their historical interest.

This is an unexceptionable view of history and he expands the point by writing (p. xi) about the

steady transfer of office and influence from lay leadership based on lineage...to lay leadership whose style and aspirations sprang from comparatively recent immigration.

The ‘characters’ are those examined in biographical studies in 12 of 14 chapters, discussed chronologically, and covering a long period — from Joshua van Oven (1766–1838) — in ‘A Dynasty for its Time, 1760–1905: The Van Ovens in Britain’ — to Harold Fisch (1922–2001), ‘Oxford to Jerusalem via the Arctic’. The reference to the Arctic is where he served as a Naval officer during the Second World War, on convoys carrying supplies to the Soviet Union. The book under review starts with a previously unpublished lecture, in a general chapter: ‘Educational Minimalism in the Ascendant, 1850–1914:

* Written before Israel Finestein’s death

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Profile of Jewish Leadership at bay'; it is, broadly, a sad story of poor educational provision for children as well as failed efforts to encourage Anglo-Jewish intellectual activity, although there were some bright spots. However, in an endnote, he comments that there has been a 'plethora of Jewish religious, cultural and educational developments' in the second half of the twentieth century.

Although Israel Finestein was born in the provincial town of Hull, his focus in this book is on London and, especially, on the United Synagogue — the main synagogal organisation in the capital. However, in a general essay on ‘London and the Regions, 1850–1914’ he interestingly describes the tension between the capital and the provinces — with some sympathy for the latter which often objected to London’s pre-eminence and to what was perceived as its neglect of the former. But even at the start of the period he is writing about, some of the local communities — such as Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool — had already developed their own strong institutions, sometimes in advance of London’s. Towards the end of the century a large number of small provincial communities came into existence, composed mainly of new immigrants who, although pious, did not have the resources for the creation of an infrastructure or for employing competent religious officials. The latter were usually immigrants themselves, and did not at first speak English. Such an official was usually designated as ‘Reverend’, and normally combined the offices of shoḥet, ḥazan, baal koreh, and mohel, often for a pittance of a salary. Many remained for no more than a few months and moved on. But London, through individual munificence, did help (a) by providing funds for the building of synagogues (or for conversion into synagogues); and (b) through the Provincial Ministers’ Fund which granted subventions to augment local salaries as well as to provide for Visiting Ministers from larger communities.

The subsequent biographical chapters deal with a number of disparate men (apart from one chapter about women, engaged in ‘a Victorian Velvet Revolution’) but not all were in positions of lay leadership in the Jewish community. James Picciotto (1830–1897) was, as the sub-title of the chapter states, a ‘Pioneer Anglo-Jewish Historian’. He was primarily a journalist whose major work was *Sketches of Anglo-Jewish History* (1875), based to a large extent on the archives of the Bevis Marks Sephardi synagogue. Another journalist was Chaim Bermant (1929–1998), whom Finestein calls ‘the modern Israel Zangwill’ and comments:

From Zangwill to Bermant there was no other Anglo-Jewish satirist of comparable quality to either.

Harold Fisch was not a lay leader in Britain since he spent more than half his life in Israel as an academic at Bar-Ilan University. Some of the essays are well-researched pieces, with sources duly noted; others are short, sometimes extensions of obituaries.
Three figures flourished in the Victorian period (although one — Albert Henry Jessel, Queen’s Counsel — lived until 1917). They symbolise, despite the differences between them, the themes and attitudes which were to be challenged. The essays about them are long and based on detailed research. Lionel Louis Cohen (1832–1887), a member of the investment banking dynasty which began with Levi Barent Cohen, also inherited a tradition of communal service, but he ‘believed unreservedly in oligarchic rule’ (p. 62); he had been a major figure in the Jewish Board of Guardians (the major Jewish social service in London) since its foundation in 1859, and he was instrumental in establishing the United Synagogue in 1870.

Lionel Louis Cohen is a crucial figure. He viewed with alarm the growing immigration of eastern European Jews and their ‘foreign’ ways. Like most British-born Jews he disliked Yiddish (‘the jargon’) and supported efforts to anglicise the newcomers. Until the immigrants were assimilated into the established Anglo-Jewish community, he thought that it was essential that the ‘recognised hegemony over the Jewish community, at least in London, on the part of the old families (of which his own was the epicentre), should be sustained’ (p. 62). However, his desire for communal discipline came up against the individualistic indiscipline of the new hevrot. Samuel Montagu (who was a member of another grand family) supported the newcomers, and formed them into a separate Federation of Synagogues.

Cohen became a Conservative Member of Parliament. Another grandee was Sir John Simon (1818–1897); he was born in Jamaica, the son of a coffee planter, and was deeply influenced by Jewish history and religion (he had considered a ministerial career or at least a preaching one). He also believed ‘in the Jewish mission to mankind, an ideal he never abandoned’ (p. 99). He was an early supporter of the liberation of slaves; indeed, his father had liberated his own slaves. It followed that John Simon favoured the North in the American Civil War. In Britain, where he had studied law, he became a Queen’s Counsel, and entered politics as a Liberal. He was also unlike Lionel Cohen in being an active member of the West London Synagogue, the first Reform synagogue in Britain, as well as in the new Cheoveve Zion movement. He was sympathetic to the working class, advocating self-help and some minimal support for their representation in Parliament. But he appears to have little to say on Jewish immigration to Britain and therefore the essay sits uneasily in this collection.

The third major character was Albert Henry Jessel. He was active in various Jewish organisations and was deeply attached to Judaism, but he ‘was clearly less interested in theology than in the assimilation of the eastern European Jewish immigrants into the Anglo-Jewish community. He saw the United Synagogue as a potentially anglicizing influence upon
them . . .’ (p. 125), yet he also tried for some sort of association with the Jewish Religious Union, the newly-formed breakaway organisation, later to become the Liberal Synagogue. In his view it would reinvigorate the community which he characterised as apathetic. Hermann Adler, the Chief Rabbi in 1909, towards the end of his life, referred to the ‘languid and half-hearted support given by our younger brethren to the cause of Judaism, its synagogues and charities’, and commented that it was a greater threat to Anglo-Jewry than the Jewish Religious Union (p. 142).

There are three shorter chapters on twentieth-century communal leaders; they are based on obituaries written by Finestein. These men were of eastern European origin but the father of one of them was born in Britain and had qualified as a solicitor. The son, Frederic Moses Landau (1905–1999), also became a lawyer, a barrister, and he was a member of the Board of Deputies of British Jews for more than five decades, as well as a Treasurer in the United Synagogue. However, as an independent voice, he also joined the new Masorti movement in the 1960s while retaining his United Synagogue links.

Victor Lucas (1916–1997) was born in the East End of London, above his father’s drapery shop. He was commissioned in the British Army during the Second World War and obtained the rank of Major. He became an important figure in London Jewish life. He was deeply attached to the United Synagogue, regarding its laws and customs as being in no way in conflict with the Judaism of his youth but believing that they supplemented and even protected them ‘in the new age through a measure of English order, good sense and discipline’ (p. 251).

It can be argued that the first major break in the Anglo-Jewish establishment was the election of the leading Zionist, Professor Selig Brodetsky, to the Presidency of the Board of Deputies during the Second World War. Lucas did not take to the Zionist Group on the Board; indeed he joined the Anglo-Jewish Association which had once been anti-Zionist and still kept its distance from it. He became President of the United Synagogue in 1984 and did his best to modernize it; in one meeting he argued that ‘we must discard what I would call our overly-cautious status quo mentality’ (p. 254) and welcomed, for example, membership equality of men and women.

In the 1950s the United Synagogue came under attack, this time from Salmond Solomon Levin (1905–1999). He was an exact contemporary of Landau’s, and was born in Limerick, Ireland, where his immigrant father was the religious functionary to the small congregation which in 1904 experienced much local hostility. This followed antisemitic sentiments by a local preacher but the Jewish community had an outspoken leader in Levin’s father. Perhaps his later independence and forthrightness as well as his thorough grounding in Jewish learning came from his father. In London he was a member of the
United Synagogue for more than sixty years and was elected in 1955 as an honorary officer against the candidate recommended by the President, Ewen Montagu. ‘The events of 1955 marked the onset of the dramatic end to a long era’ (p. 241). Montagu was the last President who was a descendant of Levi Barent Cohen — his mother was a Cohen. On his retirement in 1961 he was succeeded by Sir Isaac Wolfson, the son of a Polish immigrant and a keen Zionist. ‘Now was to be the turn of the English (or British) children of the “ghetto”, which in whatever form had for so long been envisaged, feared or hoped for in various respective quarters’ (p. 241).

Levin agreed with Chief Rabbi Brodie’s position in the ‘Jacobs Affair’ of the early 1960s. Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a leading theologian, was widely expected to become the Principal of Jews’ College, but the Chief Rabbi had successfully objected to the appointment on the grounds that Jacobs’s religious views were unacceptable, as expressed in We Have Reason to Believe — although that book had been published some years earlier. Some have argued that this veto was to prevent Jacobs becoming Chief Rabbi after Brodie. When the office of minister became vacant at the New West End Synagogue, where Jacobs had previously served, he was again prevented from taking it up. Soon after, supporters of Jacobs opened the New London Synagogue, thus inaugurating the Masorti (‘Tradition’) movement.

Finestein describes the ending of the Jacobs Affair and notes that the Masorti movement ‘grew in numbers. As did movement to the right of the United Synagogue’ (p. 245). This last is the only reference to what some might consider a major change in recent years.

It is somewhat surprising that Israel Finestein did not go into more detail about the Jacobs Affair and especially its reverberations in both the Jewish and general press. It seems to me too that more could have been made of the growing split between the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ in the Anglo-Jewish community. This can be shown statistically, from the figures of synagogue membership. The most recent report on such matters, by the Research Unit of the Board of Deputies¹ states (p. 22):

These findings provide some support for the view that there is a trend towards polarisation within the community, in which groups on the ‘right’ and on the ‘left’ of the synagogal groupings axis are growing, while the mainstream groups at the centre of the axis are showing the most significant decline.

The ‘left’ is defined as Masorti, Liberal, and Reform synagogues; the ‘right’ by those synagogues ‘whose members are assumed to be halachically observant’; ‘mainstream’ means mainly the United Synagogue and the Federation of Synagogues, as well as some independent congregations and those provincial congregations which recognise the Chief Rabbi.
There is another meaning of the growing split between the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ in Anglo-Jewry. According to some, the United Synagogue has been taken over by the ultra-Orthodox (who elect ministers of that persuasion) and has adopted the views and attitudes of the present Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks. We must also bear in mind that these ultra-Orthodox (haredim) have a high birth-rate and, it has been postulated by responsible demographers that they will become a major force in Anglo-Jewry. However, there is the example of other Jewish groups, such as the Oxford community, whose synagogue is used by all Jewish denominations.

Three small errors are worth mentioning. On p. 59 he refers to the New Dictionary of National Biography; that should be amended to Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. In the chapter on Jessel he states (p. 123) that he was an active member of the ‘newly formed Jewish Students Society at the University [of Oxford]’; but he was an undergraduate in the 1880s and in David M. Lewis’s The Jews of Oxford (1992), there is no mention of such a society until the formation of the Adler Society in 1904. The author refers on at least two occasions (pp. 217 and 226) to the minister of the Birmingham congregation as Joseph George Emanuel; he was always George Joseph Emanuel.

NOTES

2 Now Lord