IN MEMORIAM
His Honour Judge Israel Finestein

The death has occurred of His Honour Judge Israel Finestein, QC, who as well as being an avid supporter of the Jewish Journal of Sociology was a frequent contributor to its Book Reviews section.

Israel Finestein combined three highly successful careers, as a lawyer of distinction, a historian of the Jews in Britain and a communal leader. As one of British Jewry’s elder statesmen he was centrally involved in many of its communal institutions, his presidency of the Board of Deputies of British Jews proving a fitting climax to a life of service to the needs of others.

Israel Finestein — Shmuel as he was affectionately known — was a Yorkshireman, born into a large, orthodox Jewish family in the Sculcoates district of Kingston-upon-Hull on 29 April 1921. His father was a tailor, who had emigrated from Chervyen (near Minsk) sixteen years earlier. Finestein progressed from the local grammar school to Trinity College Cambridge, graduating with a double first in history in 1943. The then Master of Trinity was the celebrated historian G. M. Trevelyan, and both he and Finestein’s tutor, George Kitson Clark, urged him to undertake postgraduate research. But he turned instead to the legal profession as a career. In 1946 he entered the chambers of Quentin Hogg (later Lord Hailsham) at Lincoln’s Inn and was called to the Bar in 1953, becoming in turn a Queen’s Counsel, a Crown Court judge and a Deputy High Court judge in the family division. He also served as chair of the Mental Health Review Tribunal.

But history remained his first love. A member and twice president of the Jewish Historical Society of England, Finestein maintained the tradition of scholarly research into the history of the Jews in England carried out by gifted amateurs. Specialising in the Victorian period his early work threw new light on the legal framework within which the campaign for Jewish emancipation had been conducted, but in a series of learned articles and books his scholarship ranged widely over the sweep of Anglo-Jewish history in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A commanding speaker and a natural chairman, Finestein was drawn inevitably into the work of a wide range of Jewish voluntary
bodies both in the UK and worldwide. Chief amongst these was the Hillel Foundation, which he was a founder, and the Council of Christians & Jews, on whose executive he served. But as his legal career drew to a formal close he found himself drawn into the fractious world of intra-communal politics within Anglo-Jewry.

Finestein believed, deeply, in the centrality and continuing relevance of the great institutions of Victorian Anglo-Jewry: the Chief Rabbinate, the United Synagogue and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. He abhorred schism. During the “Jacob’s Affair”, in the early 1960s, he had worked hard behind the scenes in an attempt to heal the multiple rifts that this cause célèbre had triggered. In 1991, already a vice-president of the Deputies, he agreed to stand for the presidency against his fellow vice-president, the former Labour MP Eric Moonman. The United Synagogue regarded it as vital that the presidency be retained by one of its senior members. Following his victory Finestein used his three-year tenure of the presidency to institute long-overdue reforms of its organisation and constitution while underpinning – through the force of his own personality — its public status.

Judge Finestein was the recipient of many communal honours, including an honorary doctorate of laws conferred on him by the University of Hull. His wife of more than half a century, Marion (née Oster) predeceased him. There were no children of the marriage. He died on 12 October 2009 and was buried at the Bushey cemetery of the United Synagogue.

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