
Every twenty-five years or so since the appointment of Nathan Marcus Adler in 1845, British Jews have selected a Chief Rabbi. Officially the choice is made by representatives of the United Hebrew Congregations, first of the Empire, and then the Commonwealth, who comprise all the synagogues accepting the Chief Rabbi’s authority. In practice the major London synagogues have always wielded the greatest influence and after they formed the United Synagogue in 1870, power moved decisively into the hands of the sitting President. That was how Hermann Adler was chosen in 1891, Joseph Hertz in 1913, Israel Brodie in 1948, Immanuel Jakobovits in 1967 and Jonathan Sacks in 1991. Ephraim Mirvis was chosen at the end of the seventh and most recent process, which is a story which remains to be told. The first six selections have now been thoroughly documented by Meir Persoff in *Hats in the Ring*.

Persoff gives a blow by blow account of the twists and turns on each occasion. He has undertaken a prodigious amount of research and he has given his readers a tremendous wealth of information which will be of lasting value to students of Anglo-Jewish religious history. Persoff is a talented writer, and the interested general reader will find this book readable and entertaining. However, the data that Persoff assembled could have been more efficiently sifted. As in his earlier books on the Chief Rabbinate (this is his fourth), Persoff gives us very long extracts from primary sources, including the complete texts of each Chief Rabbi’s induction sermon. It is unclear that we need all 23 items in the list of procedures for electing a Chief Rabbi in 1843, including ‘that the cordial thanks of this meeting be given to Isaac Cohen Esq., for his very able and impartial conduct in the Chair’. We also do not need to know that a proposal to abandon the age limit of 50 for candidates in 1966 was lost by 52 votes to 46 after a recount. This is the level of detail the historian works with, not generally what they present unprocessed to their readers, at least not without some explanation of its significance. This is symptomatic of a book that is heavy on narrative but light on analysis.

Persoff tends not to interrogate his evidence to illuminate larger themes in Anglo-Jewish history and the development of one of its central
institutions. Why were all the candidates to succeed Solomon Hirschell in 1842-5 so different from their predecessor? What happened between 1891, when there was a possibility that the Reform synagogue would be involved in the election, and 1991 when they vocally distanced themselves from the office of Chief Rabbi? Did the elaborate negotiations between the United Synagogue and their poor relations in the Federation of Synagogues come to nothing in both 1948 and 1967 due to short term factors and the impact of personalities, or for fundamental structural reasons? Were the differences between them really religious, or were they social and cultural? What was the impact of the changing nature of the lay leadership, from the non-observant Robert Waley Cohen in 1948 to the much more traditional Isaac Wolfson in 1967? What does it say about British rabbinical education that the bulk of candidates for the Chief Rabbinate have always been foreign? It is a sign of an attempt to look broadly for the best talent or a failure to foster it at home?

Regretfully, Persoff does not dig deeply into the reasons for each successful candidature. We read a great deal about what the leading characters said, wrote and did, but their accounts are not critically examined to reveal the matrix of forces at work in determining outcomes, such as the voice of the Jewish press. For example, the election of Hertz requires explanation. He was in competition with Moses Hyamson, a dayan (judge) of the London Beth Din and acting Chief Rabbi, and with Bernard Drachman, a senior New York rabbi and sometime Dean of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In 1906 Hertz had failed even to be appointed Minister of the New West End Synagogue, yet seven years later he was Chief Rabbi. The *Jewish Chronicle* waged a determined campaign against Hyamson, favouring whichever candidate looked likely to beat him. Hyamson was unpopular in some sections of the East End, as Persoff mentions, but it is unlikely that this was the *Chronicle*’s major concern. It initially backed Drachman, who claimed in his memoirs that he was a great hit when he came to Britain to show himself to the community. Yet he also described how he alienated the immigrants by refusing to speak to them in Yiddish and the Anglo-Jewish clergy by displaying his distrust of their kashrut. Once Drachman had destroyed his own chances, the *Chronicle* alighted on Hertz, and he was fortunate to be the front runner when Lord Rothschild ran out of patience and summarily chose a winner.

It may be that analysis is not Persoff’s primary interest. An unfortunate element in *Hats in the Ring* is the amount of gossip. Of course the personal element is important in understanding historical events, but Persoff tends not to point to any wider significance. We see rabbis and lay leaders fighting like rats in a sack, attacking each other in the most
pointed and personal terms during the course of each contest, but we are not given a wider analytical framework to understand the relevance of the personal politics. This becomes especially apparent when Persoff turns to Jonathan Sacks. Do we need to read the bitter correspondence between Lord Jakobovits and Stanley Kalms, in which they lacerate each other and Jonathan Sacks in the process? Persoff has already spent an entire book, *Another Way, Another Time: Religious Inclusivism and the Sacks Chief Rabbinate* (Academic Press: Boston 2010) lambasting Jonathan Sacks. Persoff’s earlier book *Faith Against Reason: Religious Reform and the British Chief Rabbinate* (Vallentine Mitchell: London 2008) was designed to show that the Chief Rabbinate was and is an essentially obnoxious institution. That campaign continues in this work, and may be the real argument of a work that seems to lack a thesis.

All this is not to deny that Persoff has placed a great deal of important new information before us, and no one who wishes to understand the development of the office of Chief Rabbi and the lay and rabbinic figures who guided its fortunes will be able to ignore it. Persoff and I have debated these questions in our respective publications, and will no doubt continue to do so. However, this particular book remains essentially a gathering of raw material, another file in the case for the abolition of the Chief Rabbinate; the real work of historical analysis remains to be done.

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