IN THE ISLANDS OF THE SEA: GEOGRAPHY IN THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF BRITAIN

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Abstract

Britain’s Jewish community has experienced a unique religious history. This can only be explained by several factors, but one of those is Britain’s unusual geographical circumstances. It is a long, narrow island just a few miles off the coast of North Western Europe. It has long enjoyed intimate connections to the European mainland without ever being quite part of it. In the case of Anglo-Jewry this has led to a double disadvantage. It was neither part of the vigorous intellectual mainstream nor was it so detached that it was forced to rely on its own resources. Instead it was left semi-dependent, which inhibited exciting local religious developments. This seems to have been the case in both the medieval period, between Jewish settlement in the 1060s and expulsion in 1290, and again since the return of an open Jewish community in the seventeenth century.

The location of London in the South East of Britain fostered a particular relationship between the capital and the provinces. Regional communities could establish their own religious identities, leading to friction as central authorities attempted to assert control. The leaders of London Jewry were also involved with overseas communities. Britain was a maritime power and developed a maritime empire. Communities in the British style, with all its idiosyncrasies, were planted around the world. This article analyses these impacts of geography on British Jewish religious life, and places them in a theoretical context using scholarship on the role of its island status in moulding British history.

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Introduction

Britain’s outstanding physical attribute is that it is an island. England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the smaller land masses nearby are known as the ‘British Isles’ and even the attempt by John Pocock to drain the nomenclature of Anglo-centricity merely introduced the equally island-based phrase ‘Atlantic Archipelago’. It has never been otherwise. Jewish and non-Jewish sources alike were interested in Britain as an island. The first fact Tacitus tells us about Britain in his biography of Agricola, who was Governor of Britain and Tacitus’ father-in-law, is that it is ‘the largest of the islands known to the Romans’. In his elegy for the Jews who died in the mass suicide in York in 1190 R. Menahem ben Yaakov quoted Isaiah 24:15 to identify Britain as ‘the islands of the sea’.

The British internalised their island. It became as much a cultural or ideological attitude as a physical fact. As the sociologist and geographer Alex Law has argued, Britain became a ‘mental island’ in which the inhabitants defined themselves and their relationship with the rest of the world and its population though their status as island dwellers. As Law writes, unlike land borders, ‘in their physicality, visibility and regularity, sea borders accentuate and colour the imagined political, military and cultural tension between the defensive and offensive functions inscribed in the boundary’. In Richard II, Shakespeare delights in island imagery: ‘this precious stone set in the silver sea’. From the seventeenth century the English, and then the British, adopted the Roman symbol of Britannia, sitting amidst the waves, trident in hand. Rule Britannia from Thomas Arne’s 1740 masque Alfred, using words by James Thomson, refers to Britain rising ‘from out the azure main’, a ‘blessed isle’ with a ‘happy coast’. The idea of Britons as ‘an island race’ grew stronger in the nineteenth century, reaching its apogee in the writings of Winston Churchill and Arthur Bryant, and continues today.

What was the impact of Britain as a physical and mental island? Paul Vidal de la Blache and later Fernand Braudel and the Annales school, analysed the powerful role of geography as a long term cause, above the ‘dust of events’. As Braudel wrote, ‘behind all of human history there is this actor – an actor who promptly transforms himself, who is always adroit, who always presses himself forward and who is often decisive in
his intervention. What shall we call him? Space? The word says too little. The earth? An equivocal name. Let us say the geographical milieu’. The historical consequences of British geography, including Britain as a physical and mental island, have been the subject of consistent interest by scholars. I want to look at one aspect which has not yet been examined systematically: the role of geography in the religious life of British Jews, both medieval and modern.

Before we proceed further, two notes about methodology. First, the purpose of this article is not to bring to light new data, but rather to analyse facts which are already known in a new and, I hope, enlightening way. Secondly, it is impossible to perform a complete analysis on every aspect of Jewish religious life in Britain and how it relates to British geography in the space available here. I have therefore touched on a selection of themes, with the hope that this will spark further conversation.

I want to suggest that although the effects of geography were refracted through different political, economic, social and cultural factors, religious life in both medieval and modern British Jewry developed in response to its geographical context. This is not a complete explanation of the development of religious life in British Jewry, but it is part of the explanation. I will argue that in the medieval period, as an island twenty-two miles off the coast of Northern France, Britain was both too near and too far from longer-established and stronger communities for British Jewry to develop its own religious identity and independent institutions and resources. In the modern period, some of this dependence remained, but concurrently, Britain’s development as a maritime power ruling an empire, planted the particular form of British Judaism around the world, so that a religious culture that developed in response to specific local circumstances became an international phenomenon. Within Britain, the religious life of provincial communities developed in a way that reflected the geographical fact of a long, narrow country, with the capital located in the South East, far from many of the places it aspired to control.

Too Near and Too Far

The first impact of Britain’s geographical position as an island on the periphery of Europe was that Jews came to Britain relatively late and as a transplanted outpost of established communities. Although small numbers of Jews may have settled under Roman rule, no permanent Jewish population appeared in Britain of its own accord. Jews arrived in Germany in the fourth century, spread to France around the year 1000 but had proceeded no further by the time Duke William of Normandy
conquered England in 1066 and invited Jews from Rouen to settle in his new kingdom. Moving to a land previously entirely without Jews made the new community highly dependent on the Crown with long term consequences. As Anglo-Jewry was not a free-standing community but merely an out-of-the-way corner of French Jewry, it never grew to any great size in the medieval period. At its height in 1200, there were probably only between 4,000 and 5,000 Jews in England, compared to up to 125,000 Jews in France.

If this was the result of being distant, Anglo-Jewry also felt the effects of proximity. English Jews remained culturally attached to the French community because they were too near and too small to be anything else. In the first decades of their settlement Jews regularly went backwards and forwards between London and Rouen, and just as England was merely one province of the Norman Empire, so its Jews were part of a single French community. English Jews maintained frequent contact with the mainland, sustaining a shared identity. English Jews spoke French. When French Jews mourned the Blois Massacre in 1171, English Jews joined them, for example by observing fasts. When the community of York disappeared in the wake of Christian violence, elegies were written in France. When a synod of French rabbis convened in 1170 to enact communal takkanot (decrees), they invited colleagues from England.

The close connections between the Jews of England and France only began to weaken in 1204 when King John of England lost his Norman possessions and travel between England and France became more difficult. Yet as late as 1242 Muriel, whose husband David of Oxford was attempting to divorce her against her will, appealed to the bet din (rabbinical court) of Paris to adjudicate. She was keen to involve the French authorities because they had accepted the decree attributed to Rabbenu Gershom, the leading Northern European authority around the year 1000, which prohibited the divorce of a woman against her will. English rabbis, somewhat removed from European developments by the mid thirteenth century, had not accepted the injunction. Yet it is apparent that almost two hundred years after they first arrived the Jews of England still looked to French Jewry as the seat of authority. It is true that some distinctively English customs did emerge. By the end of the thirteenth century the English get (bill of divorce) was slightly different from that used in France, and there were some minor variations in the liturgy. Nevertheless, by the end of the medieval period of Anglo-Jewish history the English community had not firmly established itself as a separate entity, which is one reason why after the expulsion of 1290 English Jews did not maintain their identity and simply merged back into the French branch of Ashkenaz.
Scholarship

As a secondary community, Anglo-Jewry failed to produce or attract first rank scholars, and this reinforced its subordinate status. The small Jewish population could not generate or support scholars on a large scale and the great Jewish authorities of Northern France were too close for the community to need talmudists and halakhists of great stature on the ground. Commonplace questions could be answered locally by someone competent but not exceptional. More complex inquiries could be answered within a week by communicating with Troyes, Ramperupt, Corbeil or elsewhere. The religious leaders of London Jewry in the twelfth century left barely a trace on rabbinic literature. Physical proximity inhibited intellectual independence and vitality.

The growth of indigenous scholarship was impeded further by the perfectly reasonable personal considerations of established or promising scholars on the Continent. They could choose to study with one of the great scholars of the age in Northern France, or they could remove themselves from the centre of Jewish intellectual life to travel to England. They had no interest in depriving themselves of the opportunities on their doorstep, and so they stayed at home. So, as well as being too near to be culturally independent, it was also too far to be fully part of the intellectual milieu. England’s situation in the twelfth century was similar to France in the eleventh, when French Jews, including Rashi, went back to their ancestral communities in Germany to study. By the time French Jewry began to suffer major persecutions in the middle of the thirteenth century, Anglo-Jewry was already in decline, and was in no position to provide a new centre for Jewish intellectual life.

There were two brief and partial exceptions to this pattern, which both arose when the usual geographical factors were not active. The only place in England with a concentration of serious Jewish scholars in the twelfth century was York. There were at least four significant rabbis in York in the last quarter of the twelfth century. They were imported by the small but wealthy Jewish community, which was established to provide finance in the North of England. Just as it was inconvenient for people in the North who wanted to borrow money to deal with financiers in London, it was also difficult for York’s Jews to have to rely on religious rulings from London, which was two hundred miles away and even more difficult to consult with Northern France. It therefore needed an indigenous scholarly community, which persisted until York Jewry was destroyed in 1190.

The other exception was late thirteenth century London, just before the expulsion of 1290. R. Elijah Menahem of London (1220-1284) was
the leader of Anglo-Jewry as it reached its final crisis. Rapacious taxation and religious persecution isolated England from foreign communities, whose Jews were naturally disinclined to travel or settle in England. At this point London Jews finally had to rely on their own intellectual resources. R. Elijah Menahem filled that need, as a posek (jurist) and commentator. He may have been the editor of the Tosafot on Rosh Hashanah and his and his contemporaries’ original work was collected into the Tosafot Hakhmei Anglia. This is not a work of primary importance in rabbinic literature, but was the most impressive Jewish scholarship to emerge from the whole period of medieval Anglo-Jewry.24

**Regional Communities and Religious Leniency**

We have dealt thus far primarily with London Jewry. The Jews’ great dependence on the Crown encouraged them to remain in London, but the death of Henry I in 1135 precipitated a civil war between his daughter Matilda and his nephew, Stephen. The ensuing disturbances promoted the spread of Jews around England. Substantial communities arose in regional centres, including Oxford, Norwich and Lincoln, but even they were too small to support a full range of religious institutions. When in 1177 Jews were allowed to be buried outside London, the Jews of Lincoln used the York cemetery because they lacked the resources to maintain their own.25

English Jews came to rely on certain halakhic leniencies because they lacked the facilities of larger and better connected communities. Unlike many French Jews who were stringent, English Jews ate bread and drank beer and cider made by non-Jews. English Jews did not drink wine made by non-Jews and therefore had to procure wine from the continent. They obtained the agreement of Rabbenu Tam for it to be imported under one seal, rather than two, which presumably eased transit. This imported wine was scarce and expensive, so instead of drinking the prescribed quantity (a ‘cheekful’) usually required after making Kiddush, English Jews would just sip a little.26 There was a disagreement among English rabbinical authorities regarding milk produced without Jewish supervision. R. Benjamin of Cambridge, who was a student of Rabbenu Tam, adopted the Northern French opinion and ruled that such milk was forbidden even if the farmer had no non-kosher animals. R. Joseph of Lincoln disagreed, and responding to the exigencies of the English situation held that as non-kosher animals were not milked in England, unsupervised milk could be drunk.27
Accusations of Ritual Murder and Mass Suicide

Until the spread of Jews out of London, most English Christians knew Jews only as the targets of anti-Jewish polemics preached in church, or represented in mystery plays, telling Biblical stories and acted out by local guilds. In the story of the death of Jesus the Jews inevitable received an unsympathetic portrayal. The arrival of real Jews in dozens of settlements around the country must have come as a profound religious shock to their inhabitants. These provincial Jews were not only new in town, they were also distant from the royal protection available in London. It may not be incidental that the first accusation of Jewish ritual murder took place in a provincial community just after the Jews arrived, in the case of William of Norwich in 1144. The story of William began a trend across Christendom as ritual murder accusations and blood libels spread around Europe. In England alone there were three more such accusations in the twelfth century, all outside London: Harold of Gloucester in 1168, Robert of Bury St Edmund’s in 1181 and Adam of Bristol in 1183.

The best known example of anti-Jewish violence in medieval England also had a provincial setting. The events in York in 1190 sprang from resentment at the Jews’ financial power, but it only ended as bloody as it did because of York’s distance from London. When disturbances broke in London out at Richard I’s coronation banquet in 1189 they were swiftly brought under control by the King’s men. With only a local sheriff and garrison in York and without the King’s personal intervention, the violence in York went unchecked and most of the community committed suicide in Clifford’s Tower rather than face the mob. Even though a financial community reassembled fairly soon afterwards, this destruction ended York as a centre of Jewish learning.

Expulsion

After the Jews’ enemies killed the survivors of Clifford’s Tower they burned the debt records. The Crown taxed money-lending and in response Richard I instituted a system of holding the Jews’ records in secure locations and set up the Exchequer of the Jews to administer Jewish affairs. English monarchs enjoyed the best knowledge of Jewish financial dealings of any ruler in Europe. This allowed for much more efficient taxation, which by the 1250s was overwhelming and ruined the Jews. Around 10% of the Jewish population converted, and others turned to crime, especially coin clipping. Some English Jews consulted the Maharam (R. Meir ben Barukh) of Rothenberg, the leading authority
of his day in Northern Europe about whether they were bound by an oath not to clip coins if they had made mental reservations. He replied that they were not permitted to clip coins even if they had not made an oath.\(^34\) When the Jews had been drained dry they were no longer useful to the Crown and when it was politically expedient Edward I expelled them. On an island this was not difficult to effect. In the summer of 1290 Jews were accompanied to the coast, put on ships and sent to the Continent. There is no evidence of crypto-Jewish life immediately following the expulsion. Jewish life ended completely and at once.

\textit{Geography: A Continuing Factor?}

We have seen in the medieval period the ways in which the peculiarities of British geography affected Jewish religious life. Our question now, is whether a case for the impact of geography can be made for the modern period. One might think otherwise. Perhaps improved communications effectively obliterated the challenges that geography presented, and which shaped life, including religious life, in different locales. If geography did continue to wield an influence, we can expect that it did so in different ways, as the factors with which it interacted inevitably changed between the medieval and modern periods. Yet, if as Braudel argued, the impact of geography on history is both deep and long lasting, we will also find continuity. In the modern period, though the British lost their necessary insularity, their island-grown culture perpetuated a distinction and semi-detachment from the Continent even after it could have been overcome physically.

\textit{Resettlement}

Jews came to England from the 1490s, fleeing the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, but it took 150 years for an open community to be re-established. It is relatively easy to control the border of an island. Fledgling Jewish communities were broken up in 1542 and again in 1609.\(^35\) Another community assembled in the 1630s and survived until the time was right for formal recognition. The security of the community depended initially on an oral promise of protection and toleration given by Oliver Cromwell in 1656. In addition to his general sympathy for toleration, Cromwell had a particular interest in the Jews, motivated by religio-geographical considerations. He shared the common Puritan belief that it was the task of Christians to hasten the Millennium and bring the Second Coming. That could only happen when the Jews were scattered
throughout the world, including to its furthest corner, the British Isles.36 As Cromwell told the Barebones Parliament in July 1653, ‘as some think, God will bring the Jews home to their station [the Land of Israel] from the isles of the sea’.37 An Amsterdam rabbi, Manasseh ben Israel, shared Cromwell’s view about the need for Jews to be spread across the whole world, although he expected it to bring about the Messiah’s first coming, not his second. He petitioned Cromwell to readmit Jews on that basis, although he also made an economic case, which appealed to Cromwell the pragmatist.38 Nevertheless, Manasseh and Cromwell had a common religious interest in the Jews returning to England, which related directly to its geographical location.

Religious Tepidity

Jewish religious life in Britain in the modern period stands out for its tepidity. The dominant pattern has been an affiliation to traditional institutions, today labelled ‘Orthodox’, without high levels of learning or personal observance. For example, in 1961 61% of British Jews belonged to a synagogue, and 85% of those belonged to an Orthodox synagogue. Yet in Edgware in 1963 69% would eat non-kosher food outside the house, 89% would ride on the Sabbath and 20% ate on the Day of Atonement.39 This attitude began with the first Jews of the Resettlement. For crypto-Jews looking to escape persecution and make a living, London was extremely attractive because of its geographical position. Jewish merchants were keen to establish a base in this important port city with access to major trade routes. Miriam Bodian and others have argued that mercantile interests probably took priority over religious feelings for the Jews who came to London. By 1650 there were cities where they could practice their religion more freely, including Hamburg, Amsterdam and Antwerp. Jews who came to London did so because of its trading opportunities, even though Jewish religious life was less open and developed.40

This had a long term effect on the religious nature of the community. Crypto-Judaism was a complex phenomenon, and the re-emergence of crypto-Jews into open Jewish life was complicated wherever it took place, but in London there was particular resistance to the adoption of full rabbinic Judaism.41 There were Jews, including synagogue goers, who attended to business publicly on the Sabbath.42 Others went to the theatre on the Sabbath, and carried their money to pay for a ticket.43 An area of particular resistance was circumcision, even among prominent members of the community.44 In an extreme case of rejection of rabbinic Judaism, a member of the Francia family stood up in the synagogue in 1665 and
announced ‘gentlemen, all this is suited either to very great fools or very wise men’. He took off his *tallit* (prayer shawl), threw down his prayer book and walked out.\(^{45}\)

The religious leadership’s objective of returning Jews to full observance was especially difficult because London was a community on the periphery of the Jewish world, which kept the population low. In 1700 there were fewer than 1,000 Jews in London and almost none on the rest of the island. The community was too small for the leadership lightly to exclude potential members, even if they refused to comply with communal norms. Other communities, for example Amsterdam, eventually came to ignore marginal members and turned them into outsiders.\(^{46}\) By contrast, the religious and lay leadership in London retained links with non-conforming members.\(^{47}\) This was not only for religious or cultural reasons. The Sephardim of mercantile London were practical. The *Mahamad* (executive) once declared that it permitted dealings with marginal Jews ‘so as not to disturb commerce’.\(^{48}\)

This meant that deviant modes of thought, in particular hostility towards the Oral Law and Rabbinic legislation remained a presence and continued to exert an influence even after the community was relatively settled. Jacob Sasportas, *Hakham* (rabbi) 1664-5, complained bitterly about the religious attitudes of his congregants and the lack of discipline imposed by the lay leadership. He campaigned with a passion against the uncircumcised and others who did not conform.\(^{49}\) Solomon Ayllon (*Hakham* 1689-1700) made the same complaints over twenty five years later.\(^{50}\) They did not last long in office. Other *Hakhamim* chose a quieter life and a longer career, and adopted a more pragmatic stance, which reinforced heterodoxy.\(^{51}\)

*Liberal Society*

An important factor in shaping Jewish religious life in England, as Todd Endelman has argued, is the effect on the Jews of the surrounding liberal society.\(^{52}\) By the eighteenth century London was both the capital of an entire island and a major port. It had the mixed population of a capital and the culture of a port city. Like its other inhabitants, London’s Jews responded to this culture; its cosmopolitan, transient and unregulated atmosphere promoted personal autonomy.\(^{53}\) Conversion to Anglicanism was a reliable route to complete acceptance, and it became very attractive, and eighteenth century defections among the elite were widespread.\(^{54}\) The only countervailing factor was that gentile society was relatively open even to those who remained Jews, but the result of this attitude was that
while the wealthy might remain Jews officially, they quickly began to adopt the mores of non-Jews of the same economic stratum, and the abandonment of Judaism was slowed but not halted.

Within the Jewish population, as a relatively new community, geographically removed from the mainstream of Jewish life, London lacked the powerful socially adhesive forces that characterised European Jewry. This was true of Ashkenazim as well as Sephardim. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, when most Ashkenazi Jews were immigrants and carried the culture of their European origins, the herem (excommunication) still worked in London as a tool of communal discipline. When Marcus Moses questioned the validity of a divorce granted by R. Aaron Hart in 1706 and was placed in herem he found that no one in the Ashkenazi community would trade with him. However, by the middle of the century its power had dissipated under the effect of local conditions. Just fifty years later the herem had become meaningless, and was lifted.55 On the Continent by contrast, rabbis exerted a powerful measure of control until the end of the eighteenth century, that is at least fifty years after it had evaporated in London.

Scholarly Vacuum

Religious apathy discouraged leading scholars from joining the community. A lack of long-term and strong scholarly leadership promoted a generally ill-educated and religiously lax Jewish population.56 A respectable scholar, Hart Lyon left the rabbinate of the Great Synagogue in 1763 after only seven years because he was so frustrated with the low religious standards and absence of Torah learning.57 In this the Polish-German Jews of London were different to the Polish-German Jews of Germany itself. When Lyon went to his new post in Halberstadt his new community provided him with a yeshivah with twelve students.58 Lyon’s successors were equally miserable in London.59 David Tevele Schiff told his brother ‘the Shulhan Arukh Orakh Hayyim [the Sabbath and prayer] is forgotten here, and nearly also the Yoreh Deah [kashrut]…I have no pupils and not even anyone to whom I could speak on Talmudic subjects.’60

London Jewry was caught in a vicious cycle. Poor intellectual resources at home forced it to look abroad for rabbinic leadership, but the uncongenial prospect of a life in London deterred the best scholars, leaving the second rate, which reinforced and perpetuated the problem. The community was willing to tolerate the mediocre and there was little support for efforts to tackle the situation. In the mid nineteenth century when Nathan Adler wanted Jews’ College to incorporate a traditional bet
Two generally supportive communal financiers, Nathan Mayer Rothschild and Moses Montefiore withheld funding until the plan for the College was modified and it became a ministerial training college without rabbinical pretensions.61 No rabbis were ordained by the mainstream Orthodox community until the end of the nineteenth century, and even then in tiny numbers.62 This persisted even as Britain and London became the centre of the richest and most powerful empire in the world. There was a massive increase in the Jewish population in the nineteenth century, by its end there were over a quarter of a million Jews in England, yet there was still no yeshivah and one small and chronically underfunded rabbinical seminary.

To this day the Sephardim have never been led by a British born hakham or communal rabbi. Of the ten rabbis of the Ashkenazi Great Synagogue and their successors, the Chief Rabbis, only three were born in England. In the recent process to find a successor to Jonathan Sacks, many foreign candidates were considered, and the appointee, Ephraim Mirvis was born in South Africa and educated in Israel. The total number of members of the battei din of both communities comes to a mere handful, and even they were educated outside Britain. This situation shows no sign of changing. At the beginning of the twenty first century Jews’ College ceased to ordain rabbis, although there is now a part-time course sponsored by the Sephardim.

A paucity of first rank scholars in England led to a reliance on foreign authorities to settle difficult disputes. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the Hakham Tsevi in Altona was consulted twice by the Sephardim. A third approach was made by Ashkenazim who were facing a breakaway congregation.63 In the 1890s, when the recent and pious immigrants of Machzike Hadath clashed with Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler, each side procured the support of European authorities. R. Yisrael Meir Kagan (the Hafets Hayim) in Radin, Poland sided with the immigrants and R. Yitshak Elhanan Spektor of Kovno with the Chief Rabbi.64 Most recently, in 2004, when Jonathan Sacks’ book Dignity of Difference sparked controversy, the final condemnation which led to the issue of a second, amended edition came not from a British rabbi, but R. Yosef Shalom Eliyashiv in Jerusalem.

**Provincial Dependence**

Until the end of the nineteenth century religious conditions in the provinces were even worse than London. In the eighteenth century pedlars started working the British countryside and after a while, groups of these pedlars consolidated into communities.65 Synagogues were founded in
places with barely any Jewish facilities and were led by overworked, poorly paid and only basically educated religious functionaries. These communities were forced to look to London for religious guidance on any significant issue, and the Rabbi of the Great Synagogue perforce became the Chief Rabbi of the whole country. As the Voice of Jacob newspaper wrote when Rabbi Solomon Hirschell of the Great Synagogue died in 1842, ‘the provincial and colonial synagogues…have found reference and subordination indispensable in shehita, marriages, divorces etc., etc., and hence, not from design or system, but from inevitable necessity, the late Rabbi was recognized as the spiritual head of most Jews claiming British origins’.

Though British Jewry’s religious centralism stems from the needs of dispersed communities in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it took on a life of its own. The centre attempted to squash any attempt at religious independence in the provinces. Nathan Adler consolidated his hegemony in 1847 by issuing Laws and Regulations for all the Synagogues in the British Empire. This document not only instructed congregations on how to conduct their services, but also established his supremacy, both by virtue of his issuing the Laws and Regulations and through rules codified within them. When the distinguished scholar Solomon Schiller-Szinessy tried to set himself up as the religious authority of Manchester, Nathan Adler exerted all his influence to bring his provincial rival to heel. To this day, the London Beth Din enjoys certain prerogatives over conversions and marriages denied to regional communities.

Provincial Independence

In the mid nineteenth century British Jewish religious culture seemed solidly established, but upheaval came when a completely different Jewish culture arrived from Eastern Europe. Immigrants from Russia came in large numbers to Britain because it was the nearest free country. By 1911 there were almost a quarter of a million Jewish immigrants. Many were not religious, and some were anti-religious, but there were enough of those committed to observance to make an impact. They improved the standards of kashrut and established more committed congregations in London and in the great regional cities of Glasgow, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester, and major towns such as Sunderland, Hull and Sheffield. In London, close to the centres of entrenched communal power the informal congregations, minyanim and hevrot of the immigrants, even Machzike Hadath, were successfully corralled by the establishment into the
Federation of Synagogues, with Lord Rothschild and the Chief Rabbi at its head. It took the most ideological and determined German Jews in North London to resist.

By contrast, in the provinces the immigrants were more able to maintain their independence. New Eastern European style kehillot (congregations) were established. The eighteenth century provincial communities needed London, but in the nineteenth century, London found it difficult to impose its will when communities wanted to be independent. This was crucial for Russian Jews in the provinces, who were able to break free from the prevailing religiously and intellectually apathetic atmosphere. They imported traditional rabbanim, including Rabbis Hillman in Glasgow, Daiches in Leeds and Yoffe in Manchester. Provincial traditionalists managed to establish a traditional yeshivah of world standing, again away from the capital, when R. Dovid Dryan founded the Gateshead Yeshiva in the North East of England in 1929. Gateshead was the most militant of provincial communities, and successfully resisted all attempted by the Chief Rabbinate to establish control. Until the large scale movement of Hungarian Jews to London after 1956, traditional European Judaism in England, was primarily, and not incidentally, largely a provincial affair. Even after, the yeshivot of Manchester and Gateshead remained stronger than any similar institutions in London.

**Imperial Judaism**

In 1707 England and Scotland united and in 1800 Ireland joined the Union. The new United Kingdom began its phase as the world’s greatest maritime power. Colonies were planted far away, and British men and women filled them, placing pockets of Britishness across the globe. Small, English-speaking Jewish communities with few religious resources sprang up all over the world. It was natural that they looked to London, for even though its rabbis were not the greatest in the world, they were certainly the greatest who spoke English.

The British model of Judaism, with all its peculiarities and limitations, was planted around the world. Even after independence, major synagogues in the United States looked to London, whether it was the Ashkenazi Bnai Jeshurun to the Great Synagogue or the Sephardi Shearith Israel to Bevis Marks. Today’s legacy in the Commonwealth, of strong affiliation to official Orthodoxy without a high degree of personal observance can be doubly traced back to Britain’s island nature: it derives from the type of Judaism and the type of empire Britain’s geography helped to create.
We see here the development of a curious situation. Britain was considerably weaker in Jewish terms than Europe and was dependent on Europe for elite religious personnel. Yet, because of Britain’s status as a maritime-imperial power, she created many other communities in her image.

Modern Jewish Thought

Physical distance from the centres of traditional rabbinic culture placed Britain on the scholarly periphery, and the same was true when new Jewish intellectual currents began to flow. Although David Ruderman has documented a number of figures in England associated with the European Haskalah, they were unusual individuals. They had generally received their education in Germany and were not part of a British movement. The wider Enlightenment (a complex and variegated phenomenon) developed differently in Europe and in Britain. Furthermore, British universities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were much less impressive intellectual institutions than the great Continental centres, especially in the humanities. The same was true in the Jewish sphere, and the nearest Anglo-Jewry came to a Haskalah was a Jewish version of the specifically scientific British Enlightenment. At its most radical, Deist ideas current among the elite filtered into the Jewish community. They were adopted by the physician and scientist Jacob de Castro Sarmeto. Other Jews looked to the scientific Christian Enlightenment of Robert Boyle, Samuel Clarke and Isaac Newton. They retained a belief in an imminent God who governed the Universe through scientific laws, even though those laws were reliable and apparently independent. Distance from its source meant that the Haskalah in its German form barely touched Britain.

As with the Haskalah so with Wissenschaft des Judentums. The academic study of Judaism developed by Leopold Zunz, Zachariah Frankel, Abraham Geiger and others in Germany gained only a weak foothold in Britain, despite some efforts to make it otherwise. As well as being a ministerial seminary, Jews’ College was intended to be a centre of Wissenschaft. There were scholars of standing on its faculty, especially Adolph Büchler (Principal 1906-1939). Yet, it was never comparable to the great seminaries in either the Old or New Worlds. The paucity of funding and the demand for a rapid output of competent ministers rather than the nurturing of profound scholars precluded anything more. The best scholars the College produced went abroad to more lively institutions. Jacob Mann joined Hebrew Union College and Ben Zion Halper went to Dropsie College. Jewish Studies remains an
underdeveloped academic discipline in Britain. There are departments and courses in Britain but on a far smaller scale than in Israel and the United States. The difference cannot be ascribed entirely to the size of the communities; even per capita Britain is far weaker. The very success of the Limmud, the educational conference that takes places every Christmas in the English Midlands and attracts 2,500 participants, may be due to the fact that despite its short comings it remains the most exciting Jewish intellectual event in Britain by far.81

Denominations

Distance from Continental intellectual currents had affected the development of denominations in Britain. The radical ritual reforms introduced by Israel Jacobson at the Hamburg Temple and the Wissenschaft-based brand of Reform developed by Geiger more or less passed Britain by. Instead, a uniquely British expression of Reform emerged in the 1840s which did not seek to modernise Rabbinic Judaism, but to reject it. British Reformers led by David Wolf Marks rejected the binding authority of the Oral Law and rabbinic legislation under the influence of bibliocentric English Protestantism.82 English Jews, drawing upon a long tradition of scepticism to the Oral Law, seeking acceptance in wider society internalized these critiques, and some began to express them in debates within the Jewish community. Marks openly espoused a theology which rejected rabbinic innovations and therefore answered Protestant critic.83 In January 1842, at the consecration of the congregation’s new synagogue Marks declared, ‘we must (as our conviction urges us) solemnly deny, that a belief in the divinity of the traditions contained in the Mishnah, and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, is of equal obligation to the Israelite with the faith in the divinity of the Law of Moses.’84 So was born another example of the religious eccentricity of British Jewry: a Reform movement quite different to that in Europe, which verged on the neo-Karaite.85

Only in the twentieth century did European and American Reform come to London. This happened first through the Liberal Jewish Synagogue under the ideological direction of Claude Montefiore, who studied in Berlin, and imported Israel Mattuck, a graduate of the Hebrew Union College to be the congregation’s first rabbi.86 Shortly before and after the Second World War German refugee rabbis such as Ignaz Maybaum and Albert Friedlander joined and turned the British Reform movement to a European model. The recent leadership of the non-Orthodox movements contains many rabbis either from or trained in
America, including Rabbis Mark Winer (Reform) and Chaim Weiner (Masorti).

Comparisons

Some of what can be said of Jewish religious life in London can be said of other European capitals. By the end of the nineteenth century Paris, Vienna, Rome, Budapest and St Petersburg had large and wealthy Jewish populations, but they were not home to the most committed Jewish communities. Some of these cities were ports, and therefore arguably operated under the same geographical influences, but others were not. It is true that capitals whether ports or not have a cosmopolitan quality which dissolves religious tradition, nevertheless, European capitals generally were stronger Jewish religious centres than London. For example, Berlin became a hub of Jewish scholarship after it became the imperial capital. It is striking that today Berlin has a more vibrant rabbinical school than London. The seminaries in Vienna and Budapest founded in the nineteenth century were not of the standard of Frankel’s institution in (provincial) Breslau but were more impressive than Jews’ College in London. Italian Jewry supplied scholars for the Sephardi diaspora; David Nieto and Benjamin Artom both came from Italy to London to serve as Hakham and Sabato Morais went to Philadelphia. In Europe, even if there was not strength in a nation’s capital, it could often be found elsewhere in a Jewish community. In France, the yeshivah in Metz was turned into a national rabbinical seminary to supply French Jewry. London and Britain still appear to be a special case. London had neither strong religious or intellectual life itself, nor did it foster such life elsewhere in the community. We must therefore look for other causes to explain London’s peculiarity. Politics, culture and social factors played a part, but room should be left for geography.

Conclusion

No set of historical outcomes can be traced to a single cause, and an ingenious historian can make a case for the importance for just about any factor. Yet geography, Braudel’s ‘adroit actor’, seems to have played a role in the religious lives of British Jews. For all the improvements in transport and communications, some physical facts present for medieval
Anglo-Jewry were also present in the modern period. More importantly, the British did not wish to dissolve the distinctiveness from Europe and maritime prowess which they attributed to their island status. They therefore augmented their physical island with a mental island, serving the same function. As Scott has written, ‘insularity had always been a geopolitical rather than a geographical claim. Geography informed, but culture completed the work’. 88

The largest community in British Jewry in both the early and later periods, that of London, was both too near to and too far from stronger centres to develop its own religious resources and mostly attracted second rank religious figures. Judaism developed differently in Britain because of its distance from the great European centres of Jewish life, and later because Britain’s interest was directed towards its empire. In what at first appears a paradox, only in more isolated provincial communities, whether York in the twelfth century or Gateshead in the twenty first, could a vibrant and independent Jewish intellectual life be established. Britain’s isolation also led to dependence.

British Jewry has always had to look to Europe and then to America for guidance and personnel. It was strikingly different to foreign communities, but also relied upon them. In the case of Jewish religious history, then, Alex Law’s thesis requires some revision. Britain’s sea borders did not make Anglo-Jewry more independent, but rather the opposite. Britain as an island close to the coast of Europe tied British Jewry to foreign communities in a way we might not have expected, just as a particular form of Judaism developed within the sea border. 89 This was the case in both the early and the later community, making geography an important and a continuing factor.

Notes


3 Tacitus, Agricola, 1:10.
4 See the survey of the development of this linguistic turn in Scott, J. When the Waves Ruled Britannia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2011.
12 Shibbolei Haleket, 3.


She’elot Uteshuvo t Hakham Tsevi. Amsterdam 1712 numbers 18 and 38; Johanan Holleschau, Maaseh Rav. Amsterdam 1707 pp 10-12.

For a full, if partisan, account, see Homa, B. A Fortress in Anglo-Jewry. London: Shapiro Vallentine 1953 pp 9-52.


Voice of Jacob. 11 November 1842.

Adler, N.M. Laws and Regulations for all the Synagogues in the British Empire. London 1847.


Jews from London, but from Brazil, but in Hyamson’s phrase, became a foster-child of Bevis Marks.


85 Singer referred to the English Reform movement as neo-Karaite. That is not quite accurate, because the Karaites rejected rabbinic law, Marks argued instead that although it was not binding, it should be retained when it was edifying.


87 For example, hemophilia and the end of the Romanov dynasty, or A.J.P. Taylor’s explanation of the outbreak of the First World War.

88 Scott, J. When the Waves Ruled Britannia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011 p 172

89 A similar argument can be made for other aspects of cultural history. Eighteenth and nineteenth century British musical life relied on foreign imports: Handel, Halle, Costa etc. British musicians were trained abroad, e.g. Sullivan.