

Chief Rabbis

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The British Jewish community, like all communities, reflects the ethos of its host society. British conservatism, with its deference towards hierarchies and establishments, has certainly influenced the excessive respect that Anglo-Jewry has for authority and in particular for the position of Chief Rabbi. However, this characteristic has also been blamed for restricting freedom of thought and creativity far more than in communities like the United States that do not have Chief Rabbis. I have just read [*Britain's Chief Rabbis and the Religious Character of Anglo-Jewry 1880-1970*](#) by Benjamin Elton, which I heartily recommend.

There have been several attempts to analyze the impact of successive Chief Rabbis on Anglo-Jewry. Most notably Meir Persoff's [*Faith Against Reason: Religious Reform and the British Chief Rabbinate, 1840-1990*](#), Todd Endelman's [*The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000*](#), and Miri Freud-Kandel's [*Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913: An Ideology Forsaken*](#). Benjamin Elton's major contribution to the field is a thoroughly researched comparison of the ways Chief Rabbis over a century have dealt with challenges to their authority. He comes to the conclusion that they all acted consistently with their religious beliefs.

For much of the period that Elton covers, the United Synagogue, as the Orthodox umbrella of Anglo-Jewry is known, tolerated standards that in practice allowed for a great deal of laxity and leeway. Most members did not keep Shabbat and drove to synagogue before going off after Saturday services to soccer matches or their businesses. Mixed choirs sang in several synagogues. Its Ministers of Religion dressed like Anglican churchmen. The mikvah was all but abandoned. It was not until Sir Isaac Wolfson in 1962 that the United Synagogue had a traditional Orthodox lay president. The supervision of kashrut in butcher shops and at functions was much more lenient then.

The arrival of survivors from Eastern Europe began to exert far more Orthodox pressure on the community. The enclaves of genuine Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy began to assert themselves and over time expanded beyond the confines of their ghettos in Gateshead and Stamford Hill. Whereas once the Chief Rabbi set the tone, increasingly it was the Beth Din, made up of men from far stricter backgrounds, who came to be the arbiters of United Synagogue practice. Chief Rabbi Hertz did invite the magisterial Dayan Abramsky to head the Beth Din in between the World Wars. But it was not until many years later that the Beth Din felt strong enough and had a large enough base of support to slowly but surely suborn the authority of the Chief Rabbi. From being the Court of the Chief Rabbi, appointed by him, it turned into a self-perpetuating oligarchy.

The effect over time was that the United began to drift to the right halachically and is doing so lost much of its constituency. Some have argued

that this was a good and healthy development but it has certainly been at the expense of intellectual openness.

What was the role of the Chief Rabbi? Was it to reflect the mood of his community or to try to change it? Was he the religious executive or the representative of everyone within the community? Perhaps the Chief Rabbi's role was purely a diplomatic one, looking towards the non-Jewish world as much as the Jewish?

If the aim of the Chief Rabbinate under Adler and Hertz was primarily to halt Anglo-Jewry's slide towards Reform or assimilation, under Brodie it was increasingly a struggle to accommodate the growing pressure from right-wing Orthodoxy. The Jacobs Affair is often regarded as the turning point when Anglo-Orthodoxy took a decisive lurch to the right. Rabbi Louis Jacobs, an Orthodox rabbi who had studied in the Gateshead Kollel before becoming a pulpit rabbi and then lecturer at Jews College, had suggested that the dogma that every word of the Torah was dictated on Sinai, need not necessarily be taken literally. Brodie then blocked him from advancement at Jews' College and subsequently from the United Synagogue rabbinate itself. Was this because he himself disagreed with his theology, or was it because of pressure from the right? Elton suggests it was because Brodie himself did not agree with Jacobs. I am not convinced of this from my personal knowledge of Brodie.

I incline to the view that Brodie, like all Chief Rabbis I have known, was zealous for the position and felt he had to hold the line. He saw his role as that of chairman of a company or headmaster of a school, constantly having to weigh the right decision to take when there were conflicting interests and to decide which battles were worth fighting and which were not. Invariably the safe solution was to compromise, to fudge the issue, or to take the decision that would do less damage. Brodie was a good man. He chose to accede to the pressures from the right and probably believed them to be in the long-term interest of Anglo-Jewry. He might well have been right, with hindsight but it came at a price.

Immanuel Jakobovits was, in my opinion, the most religious and humane of the Chief Rabbis I encountered. But he too saw his executive role as requiring him to "do the right thing" for the US. The rulings of the Beth Din on all sorts of wider issues were never challenged until the present Chief Rabbi of the UK, Rabbi Mirvis, chose to publicly ignore their advice on the issue of Limmud. (He capitulated on other issues subsequently.)

Only a rampant Beth Din can explain Chief Rabbi Sacks' obedience in refusing to attend Limmud and his acquiescence in forbidding Louis Jacobs from being called up for his grandson's bar mitzvah on the grounds that he couldn't recite a blessing over the Torah that he claimed did not come from Heaven. If that were the real criterion, then 90% of all those called up to the Torah in United Synagogues should never have been.

I have a problem with the mixture of power, religion, and appointed authority. Inevitably the interests of institutions come at the expense of individuals and individuality. Power diminishes soul. I cannot begin to number the men and women I have encountered who have been rejected and

rebuffed by religious authority sticking to a rigid line and an uncompromising stance. I look to great rabbis to moderate such positions, to set spiritual examples rather than executive ones. It is for that reason that I have been so disappointed with the performance of so many Chief Rabbis, wherever they have functioned. No one is perfect, certainly not me, but if one takes on a position of leadership then one must be prepared to lead and stand up for what one really believes in.