

# Anglo History

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

After the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, there was no official Jewish presence in England until the time of Oliver Cromwell. In 1655 he convened a conference in Whitehall to discuss the official readmittance of Jews to England. But, with opposition from the Church and the merchants, no official decision was taken. Yet a blind eye was turned and several families settled in London.

The first official Jewish synagogue in England after the expulsion was the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, Sha'ar haShamayim (which the diarist Samuel Pepys visited in 1663). It was built during the reign of William & Mary and located in Creechurch Street in the City of London. In 1702 the famous Bevis Marks Synagogue was completed (with a generous gift from Queen Anne). The Jewish community then was overwhelmingly Spanish and Portuguese. They regarded the newly arriving Ashkenazim as unwashed barbarians and soon introduced rules banning the "tedescos" from holding office.

So the Ashkenazim set up their own synagogue, also in the city. The first record of their congregation dates from 1695 with what would, in time, be called the Great Synagogue, and that eventually Duke's Place. But Ashkenazim, being what all Jews have always been, fractious and divided, soon set up another called the Hambro', after the Jews from Hamburg who funded it. Naturally the first synagogue put a cherem, a ban on it, but eventually relented. As the population moved westward out of the City of London, a new Ashkenazi synagogue was founded in 1761, initially called the Hebra Kaddisha Shel Gemilluth Hassadim, Westminster, later known as the Western. It did not join the Great/Hambro' alliance but remained independent. Still they were few in number.

Slowly many of the early Iberian immigrants began to assimilate and intermarry. But during the next century, thousands of Ashkenazi refugees from Europe came into the country and became the dominant force in Anglo-Jewry. They were formally constituted by an act of Parliament into the United Synagogue (a Jewish version of the Church of England), and their Chief Rabbi came to be regarded as the religious representative of the community. The benefit of being the "Official Jewish Church" was that the United Synagogue came to be regarded as the "default" of Jewish life. But the loss was that nominality, outward adherence to Orthodoxy, really masked apathy and assimilation.

Meanwhile, a breakaway group from the Spanish and Portuguese had founded the first Reform congregation in London called the West London Synagogue. One would have thought that, as in the USA, this would have become the most numerous denomination. But it never did because of the character of Anglo-Jewish conformity to hierarchy and establishment. Throughout this time "The Western" had flourished independently, although its character was rather similar to that of the United Synagogue in its laid back none-too-frum

character. It moved to the Haymarket and acquired its own burial grounds in the Fulham Road and then Cheshunt.

The war shifted the Western again, and in the 1950s it built a new synagogue in Crawford Place off the Edgware Road. At that time the West End had a significant Jewish population. In the decades that followed the Jewish population moved north, and the Western was stranded in what then became known as Little Lebanon!

I became the rabbi of the Western in 1985. I relished its independence, even if it was in decline, because I was not prepared to sell my soul or my independence to the United Synagogue or any other organization. In 1990 the Western was struggling to sustain itself with members as they died out or moved away, although financially it was well off. It became obvious that the Western should merge with the United Synagogue neighbor, Marble Arch. The merger made sense. I encouraged it. But when the new organization decided to remain within the United Synagogue, I left.

The first task I had when I joined the Western was to make a decision about selling the burial ground on the Fulham Road. It had been filled up in the 1880s and was now walled and derelict. A real estate company had offered millions for the site and had offered to transfer the 280 or so remains to be reinterred in Jerusalem. Halachically, one may only reinter a body if it is to go to a better or more spiritual location, and nothing could be better than the Mount of Olives. I supported the move, but the "Ecclesiastical Authorities" of London objected.

Their argument was not a halachic one. It was partly, "What will the goyim say? That Jews are prepared to do anything to make a quick buck?" Which is typical of the cringing insecurity of much of Anglo-Jewry. The other argument was that dotted around England there are tens of ancient burial grounds, many dating back to before the expulsion, and if we allow one to be developed, pressure will build to do the same for all of them.

And the Charedi world objected because it has long made a thing out of burial grounds, even where it is clear no Jewish bones were involved. Lord Jakobovits once told me a supermarket in York was held up for years because some passing yeshiva bochur claimed Jewish bodies were found in the foundations, whereas he and experts were utterly convinced they could not have been. A similar issue is currently holding up a hotel in Jaffa. It is one way of raising money.

To make matters worse, the Spanish and Portuguese congregation, not being subject to the anxieties or the threats of the Ashkenazi authorities, had themselves recently sold one of their disused burial grounds, so this now became a matter of principal. In the end, the board of the Western caved in and the whole thing was shelved.

Here is the point. Before the Western could even think of proceeding, they needed to contact relatives of all those buried in the Fulham Road to get permission. Two-hundred eighty Jews had died and were buried over a hundred year period; they got permission, but also discovered that not one single one

of them had a living Jewish relative. Most of the original Spanish and Portuguese families over the same period had gone the same way. The type of Judaism they both practiced was a formality, devoid of passion or total commitment. Admittedly, times were different. The pressure to assimilate was greater. The rewards of remaining a Jew were less manifest than nowadays. But the fact was that only the injection of newer immigrants and a revival of more genuine Orthodoxy have kept these august institutions alive and well.

Some people wonder why I, who find so much to criticize in intense Orthodoxy, still nail my colors so firmly to its mast. The simple answer is that no other way of living Judaism has such a track record of survival, coming back from the edge and inspiring continuity. No system is perfect. Every system has warts and failings. But some survive better and are more successful in handing down a tradition than others. Communities come and go. Who remembers now that Otranto and Bari were the strongest Jewish centers of learning a thousand years ago? No one's left there. But we are here.