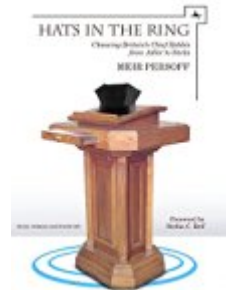


**Meir Persoff.** *Hats in the Ring: Choosing Britain's Chief Rabbis from Adler to Sacks.* Judaism and Jewish Life Series. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013. xxii + 337 pp. \$34.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-61811-269-9.



**Reviewed by** Frederic J. Krome

**Published on** H-Judaic (March, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

In the modern age, six men have served as chief rabbi of Britain (the exact title of the office has evolved over the years): Nathan Marcus Adler (1845-90), Hermann Adler (1891-1911), Joseph Herman Hertz (1913-46), Israel Brodie (1948-65), Immanuel Jacobovits (1967-91), and Jonathan Sacks (1991-2013). In addition, one candidate, Yaa-cov Herzog, was elected in 1965 only to decline the position. Meir Persoff has mined an impressive range of communal records, memoirs, interviews, and the available secondary sources to provide case studies of the communal politics behind each selection.

At the risk of starting with a negative, it is important to recognize what this book is not; it is not a history of Anglo-Jewry, Anglo-Jewish institutions, or Jewish theology in Britain. The book does, however, contain material relating to all these topics. This is both a strength and weakness, for while Persoff does not get bogged down in the minutiae of communal organizations, politics, or theology, it also means that the reader has to have more than a passing familiarity with the broad

history of Anglo-Jewry to follow the action. A major strength of the book is that by focusing on the election process, Persoff, a former editor at the *Jewish Chronicle*, provides insight into both the long-term tensions within Anglo-Jewry and a snapshot of intra-communal issues that dominated each chief rabbi's selection. Persoff also provides the text of the inaugural sermon of each rabbi, thereby enabling the reader to see how the communal controversies often shaped the agenda of the office holder.

Persoff begins in 1842 when Solomon Hirschell issued the last official *Cherem* (excommunication) conducted by a chief rabbi of Britain. The ban was directed against the upstart Reform movement, and while it did break apart some families, significantly it did not force the religious rebels back into line. The controversy about the ban colored the subsequent discussions about Hirschell's successor. The process of choosing a chief rabbi was (and is) dominated by the United Synagogue, which in American parlance is a Modern Orthodox establishment (and American read-

ers might be driven a little crazy by Persoff's abbreviation of it as US). Yet in 1842, the United Synagogue probably did not represent the majority of Anglo-Jewry. Meanwhile, those who chose Nathan Marcus Adler as chief rabbi of the British Empire were among the establishment elites, and therefore a minority within a minority chose what was popularly understood to be the representative, or head, of an entire Jewish community.

Adler's election reveals some of the long-term issues facing Anglo-Jewry and its leadership: Who gets to vote for the candidate (certainly not a democratic process)? What power does the chief rabbi in actuality have to assert religious discipline within the Jewish community? Is the chief rabbi in fact really a representative of all Anglo-Jewry? Adler's election occurred at a pivotal moment in relations between the Orthodox and Reform communities, and the exclusion of the latter from the process helped keep tensions high.

The subsequent election of Nathan's son, Herman Adler, raised the short-term question of whether the chief rabbinate would become a hereditary office. Interestingly, by the time of the younger Adler's elevation, the chief rabbi's authority to issue communal excommunications was curtailed. It also occurred at a time (1891) when the Anglo-Jewish community was being transformed by the mass immigration of eastern European Jews, many of whom considered the English Orthodox to be too accommodating or too "Anglicized" to represent their religious interests. Thus the chief rabbi's authority was not recognized as binding by members of the Hasidic community, the Masorti, or by those who formed the Liberal wing of Anglo-Jewry. By this time, the London Jewish community in particular also had a geographic east/west split, with the eastern part being the powerbase of the ultra-religious while the more assimilated Jews (including traditionalists) lived in the western section.

It is also interesting to note that several chief rabbis attained ordination at non-English institu-

tions. The elder Adler was trained in Germany, while the younger Adler's successor, Hertz, was a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York. Hertz was chosen as chief rabbi of the United Kingdom for his impeccable traditional credentials, and yet during his tenure the number of Liberal synagogues and people identifying themselves as Liberal Jews expanded. Today, Hertz is mostly remembered as the editor of the Soncino Press *Pentateuch and Haftorah*, which was presented to American boys at their Bar Mitzvah ceremonies in Conservative synagogues (mine still sits on the shelf in my study). During his tenure as chief rabbi, however, Hertz fought a long and losing battle against innovation. Unfortunately for him, his rabbinate also encompassed the era of the world wars, challenges that exhausted many Jewish leaders.

In the aftermath of total war and the Holocaust, the office of chief rabbi was reenvisioned as an institution whose purpose was to provide religious guidance and promote communal consensus. Achieving consensus foundered upon controversies over such issues as Zionism and the interpretation of religious texts. For example, near the end of his tenure, Brodie was involved in what became known as the "Jacobs Affair"; Rabbi Louis Jacobs's book, *We Have Reason to Believe* (initially published in 1957), challenged some conventional interpretations over the origins of biblical texts. Brodie not only refused to approve Jacobs's appointment as principal of Jews College, but also vetoed Jacobs's return to the pulpit of the New West End Synagogue. The result was a further split in Anglo-Jewry as Jacobs and his supporters founded the New London Synagogue, and thus the chief rabbi's circle of influence over Anglo-Jewry was further reduced. Interestingly, by the time Sacks was elected, the position was now titled the chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations, and the job description had evolved even further; now he was expected to serve as an emissary of

Anglo-Jewry to the non-Jewish world, and few spoke of consensus within the Jewish community.

Persoff's study reminds the reader of the tired (and probably not very funny anymore) joke about four Jews and five opinions. Persoff also implicitly addresses a topic related to the diversity, or chaos, of Jewish communal politics: the almost maniacal desire throughout the modern age, but especially in the post-Holocaust world, to achieve consensus or unity between warring/competing factions within the community. This desire for consensus is not unique to Anglo-Jewry for in the aftermath of World War II American Jewish leaders also pursued it with abandon.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Frederic J. Krome. Review of Persoff, Meir. *Hats in the Ring: Choosing Britain's Chief Rabbis from Adler to Sacks*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2014.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39446>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.