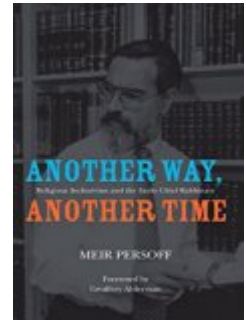




Meir Persoff. *Another Way, Another Time: Religious Inclusivism and the Sacks Chief Rabbinate.* Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010. xxi + 373 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-936235-10-0.



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The future of the British chief rabbinate, in a manner that somewhat reflects the tenuous foundations of the post, has repeatedly been a matter of conjecture. Meir Persoff's new work provides the first book-length study of the current chief rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, and assesses his contribution to the office. It considers the legacy Sacks will be leaving as he approaches retirement in 2013 and addresses the question of whether he may or indeed should be Britain's last chief rabbi.

Presented as a sequel to his earlier *Faith Against Reason: Religious Reform and the British Chief Rabbinate, 1840-1990* (2008), Persoff's latest publication continues his account of the conflicts and crises of Anglo-Jewry's lay and religious leadership. Analyzing the template of inclusivism that was explicitly placed at the heart of Sacks's chief rabbinate at the time of his appointment, *Another Way, Another Time* chronicles a repeated failure to prevent increasing polarization among Jews in Britain. Whether any chief rabbi could hope to arrest a trend facing many Jewries is questionable. Yet Persoff's conclusion is unequivocal. As the

proportion of Jews formally represented by a chief rabbi continues to diminish, the validity of efforts to maintain the post is hard to establish. While no clear model of a replacement for the chief rabbinate is offered by Persoff, he asserts that in its current form the post has become unrepresentative, divisive, and consequently inappropriate.

As with his earlier book, Persoff brings together an impressive array of material from newspapers, personal and institutional archives, interviews, and published works. It is worth noting that Persoff was quite intimately involved in parts of his story, as a journalist at the *Jewish Chronicle* prior to his move into research. With so little historical distance from the events being related, objectivity could be hard to achieve. The *Jewish Chronicle's* treatment of the chief rabbinate has often been viewed, at least since the 1950s, as somewhat partisan, inclined to identify the negative. The variety of other sources used by Persoff reflects his efforts to try to portray events in as objective a way as possible. By providing ex-

tended citations from his sources Persoff creates a valuable resource for future research on the British chief rabbinate and in particular on Jonathan Sacks's tenure in the office. However analyzing a chief rabbinate while the incumbent is still in post is always likely to pose some problems.

Persoff relates how even prior to Sacks's elevation to the chief rabbinate he found himself mired in controversy. The forced redundancy of Simcha Bunim Lieberman (1929-2009), the respected *halakhist* (authority on Jewish law) who was Lecturer in Talmud and Codes at Jews' College while Sacks was Principal, established a model that later conflicts would follow once he became chief rabbi. At least one aspect of the difficulties Sacks faced here derived from his efforts to implement a more inclusive agenda--in this instance an attempt to broaden the curriculum of the college's *semikhah* (rabbinic ordination) program. This brought him into conflict with Orthodox opponents both within and outside Anglo-Jewry. The key problem Persoff details is how since becoming chief rabbi a frequent inability to defend his position against the onslaughts of his opponents has often led Sacks to yield theological ground in a manner that has undermined his chief rabbinate.

The numerous crises the chief rabbi has experienced, with his heralded Jewish Continuity and Women in the Community projects, in relations with *Masorti* (Conservative Jews), with his own *Bet Din* (rabbinic court), and with varied ultra-Orthodox bodies, are all addressed in this work. Persoff also treats the immensely damaging Hugo Gryn Affair. He details how this both harmed relations with Reform Jews and demonstrated some questionable judgments by the chief rabbi, in writing a letter privately criticizing the recently deceased Reform Rabbi Gryn in rather inflammatory terms while publicly offering to attend a memorial in his honor. The heresy claims levelled at Sacks following publication of his *The Dignity*

of Difference (2002), and most recently controversies regarding conversion, especially as played out in the JFS (formerly known as the Jewish Free School) trial, are also examined. Opening each of his chapters with a quote from Sacks's installation address, which laid out the new chief rabbi's goals for a "Decade of Renewal," Persoff produces a study which highlights how these principles became shipwrecked in the stormy seas of the chief rabbinate.

It seems notable that Jewish life in Britain has undergone a considerable transformation during the years of the Sacks chief rabbinate. Sacks entered office challenging Anglo-Jewry to consider its sense of Jewish identity and its means of securing survival in the long term. A striking revitalization in Anglo-Jewish life has occurred during his tenure in office, highlighted by a growing willingness to promote a distinctive Jewish voice in Britain that was previously all-too-often silenced. Sacks's successes among the wider British public in securing a measure of moral authority to his statements in certain areas could be seen to have contributed to a growing Anglo-Jewish confidence. For all Persoff's detailed accounts of the difficulties Sacks has faced in seeking to implement his agenda, renewal has occurred in many sectors of Anglo-Jewry.

Yet the abiding sense of Sacks's chief rabbinate that emerges from Persoff's study is of a failure of leadership. The extent to which Sacks can take credit for revitalization is questionable and Orthodox inclusivism has not been a prominent feature in many of the types of renewal that have occurred. In being caught between a desire to represent all Jews in Britain while occupying a post recognized only by certain members of mainstream Orthodoxy, Sacks has repeatedly found himself navigating between his own Scylla and Charybdis. Trying to please, or at least appease, all parties, he has all too often faced criticism from every direction.

As an Orthodox chief rabbi heading an Orthodox synagogal institution, his ideal of inclusivism was designed to provide an alternative to Jewish pluralism, whose validity he rejected following the precedent of predecessors in the chief rabbinate. His claim was that this should not preclude a sense of love and friendship between all Jews—as members of the Jewish people rather than members of Jewish denominations. Theological difficulties with his inclusivism were expressed by adherents of Progressive Judaism from the outset. A number of statements during his chief rabbinate further undermined this offer of friendship and reduced any limited willingness that might have existed among Progressive groups to be represented by a chief rabbi. At the same time, negative perceptions of “Dr. Sacks,” the Cambridge-educated philosopher, limited the chief rabbi’s authority within certain sectors of Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy.

Persoff’s work highlights how, in his repeated efforts to assuage ultra-Orthodox concerns about his theological positions, Sacks has drifted away from the principles that brought him to office. His commitment to provide leadership to the mainstream of Anglo-Jewry, traditionally dominated by at least nominal allegiance to Orthodoxy, has been sidetracked by a perceived need to shore up his credentials among the more ultra-Orthodox. Indeed his initial request to defer his appointment as chief rabbi, to allow him a year of intensive Talmudic study in Israel, seemingly betrayed fears from the outset about perceptions of his Jewish learning, rather than his actual leadership.

When we move beyond the narrow confines of Anglo-Jewry, it is clear that Sacks, following a model laid down by some of his predecessors, successfully uses his chief rabbinate to establish himself as an important religious guide in the troubled times in which he is ministering. In wider British society and among certain Jewish communities outside Britain, it is notable how the chief rabbi has secured an authoritative voice that is all

too often lacking in his internal communal dealings. It is the sort of authority that could prove beneficial within Anglo-Jewry.

While Persoff’s work focuses on the successes and failures of Jonathan Sacks as chief rabbi, the broader question to be addressed, separated from considerations of individual personalities, is the office of chief rabbi itself. As Persoff notes, following many others, the post demands an improbable balancing act between the need to serve the communities who formally elect the chief rabbi and a perception that it can somehow fulfill a representative function for all of Anglo-Jewry alongside other religious leaders in Britain. The chances of success in this task were always limited. As such, the rather harsh assessment of Sacks that emerges from Persoff’s study should be placed in context.

In both of Persoff’s books in this field he has detailed the repeated calls made throughout the history of the chief rabbinate for its abolition, particularly each time there have been deliberations about making a new appointment. Nonetheless, new appointments have been made each time. Despite the numerous crises that have marred the Sacks chief rabbinate, the United Synagogue has confirmed its intention to proceed with a new appointment in 2013. The circulation of the *Jewish Chronicle* is increased through its, often partisan, coverage of the crises associated with the office. Widespread agitation for an end to the post is nevertheless still missing. Yet mainstream Orthodoxy’s dominance of Anglo-Jewry is waning. Alongside increases in ultra-Orthodox and Masorti Judaism, a strengthening of ethnic Jewish identifiers is apparent in Anglo-Jewry. Catching up with trends experienced by many Jews outside Britain, the traditional emphasis on synagogue membership and other religious markers of Jewish identity is becoming displaced among a growing sector of British Jews. As these shifts become entrenched, the lasting viability of Victorian institutions reflecting Victorian sensibilities deserves to be questioned. Persoff’s work undoubtedly con-

tributes to this task. Yet uncertainty remains over how much Anglo-Jewry itself is willing to engage in the debate.

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