

Browse > [Home \(https://www.jwire.com.au/\)](https://www.jwire.com.au/) / [Books \(https://www.jwire.com.au/category/the-arts/books/\)](https://www.jwire.com.au/category/the-arts/books/),
[Featured Articles \(https://www.jwire.com.au/category/featured-articles/\)](https://www.jwire.com.au/category/featured-articles/) / Reason to Believe: The
 Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs

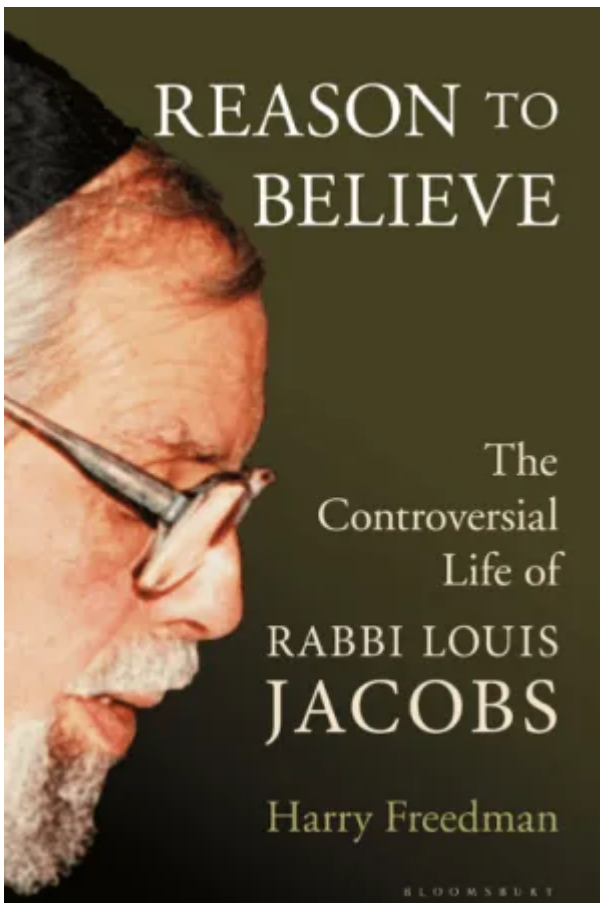
Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs

[✉ \(https://www.jwire.com.au/reason-to-believe-the-controversial-life-of-rabbi-louis-jacobs/email/\)](https://www.jwire.com.au/reason-to-believe-the-controversial-life-of-rabbi-louis-jacobs/email/) [Email This Post \(https://www.jwire.com.au/reason-to-believe-the-controversial-life-of-rabbi-louis-jacobs/email/\)](https://www.jwire.com.au/reason-to-believe-the-controversial-life-of-rabbi-louis-jacobs/email/)
[Print](https://www.jwire.com.au/reason-to-believe-the-controversial-life-of-rabbi-louis-jacobs/#respond)

[Leave a Comment \(https://www.jwire.com.au/reason-to-believe-the-controversial-life-of-rabbi-louis-jacobs/#respond\)](https://www.jwire.com.au/reason-to-believe-the-controversial-life-of-rabbi-louis-jacobs/#respond)

November 19, 2020 by Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen

It seems strange that I received this book on the day I heard about the death of Jonathan Sacks, the Emeritus Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of the United Kingdom...writes Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen.



The irony was Rabbi Jacobs was once described by the U.K.'s Jewish Chronicle as the 'best Chief Rabbi we never had'. Also to mark the 350th anniversary of the settlement of Jewry in the United Kingdom from the days of Oliver Cromwell the Jewish Chronicle conducted a poll asking who was the Greatest British Jew.

Not surprising, at least for those who respected his writings and his role as a congregational rabbi, he received more than twice as many votes ahead of the next candidate which included Benjamin Disraeli (even though he was raised and continued as a Christian); Simon Marks of Marks and Spencer, Chaim Weizman,

Isaiah Berlin and Harold Pinter.

He was born into a traditional Jewish family in Manchester in 1920. While synagogue attendance was the norm on Shabbat morning his father would take him to watch a rugby game in winter and cricket at the Old Trafford in summer. Both his parents had intellectual potential but were limited by their financial reality. This led to him attending five schools during his schooling. He entered Manchester Yeshiva and today we would say it was where he “got religion” or as he described it that he became ‘an insufferable prig and religious fanatic’.



Rabbi Louis Jacobs

It was at Manchester Yeshiva under the guidance of one of his teachers, a Habad Hasid that he developed a fascination for Kabbalah and Hasidism- an interest which would lead to his testimony on the ownership of the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe's library, against the claims of the Rebbe's grandson. In 1941 he moved to Gateshead to become one of the first 20 students in the Kollel, and the only one with any secular education. The Head of the Yeshiva went so far as to describe Jacobs as “an *ilui* {Talmudic genius} of such depth”. And yet when one looks at the list of ‘its members (who) have gone on to teach or study’ the one name missing is Louis Jacobs.

After World War II Louis, now married with one child, moved to London. It was here he began following the concept of Torah Im Derekh Eretz favoured by the followers of Samson Rafael Hirsch who believed that Jewish scholarship could be combined with secular learning. They moved back to Manchester when he became Rov of Manchester Central Synagogue. It was while there that he received his PhD.

Jacobs' daughter tells the story of walking to shul on Shabbat afternoon. When they would pass (open) shops she, as a five-year-old, would need to walk twice as fast for her father would say “let's speed up here” and “we don't want to shame anybody.”

In 1954, he returned to London to assume the pulpit at the New West End Synagogue in Bayswater. It was a community of the well-to-do. It was here that he shifted from the traditional type of discussion based on the Talmud to one where his underlying thoughts on Judaism were challenged and that he was asked not only about the meaning of faith but also issues and complexity of theology. It was here that he began to formulate his ideas which appeared in a book in 1957 as *We Have Reason to Believe*. It was an examination of Maimonides Thirteen Principles of Faith. Freedman gives a good basic analysis of the book over a few pages.

In 1960, he took up a position of Moral Tutor at Jews' College [now effectively defunct but resurrected in another form as the London School of Jewish Studies but without a training program for rabbis]. It was assumed that this was a path to becoming Principal of the College and in the mind of many the future Chief Rabbi. As the time for a new Principal became close Dayan Grunfeld of the London Beth Din became Jacobs' strongest critic going so far as to ‘red-line’ a copy of *We Have Reason to Believe* highlighting what he considered all the errors in the book. Due to the campaign against his appointment of Principal, Jacobs

chose to resign from Jews College at the end of 1961. This led to many members of the College Council resigning. For a number of reasons, the furore which would become known as “The Jacobs Affair” also was picked up by the popular secular Press. Jacobs had the Jewish Chronicle, and its editor on his side as well.

Jacobs tried to return to his previous position at New West End Synagogue. This was blocked by the Chief Rabbi. Many of his supporters established the Society for the Study of Jewish Theology and subsequently established New London Synagogue which eventually became the flagship for British Masorti Judaism. But that story probably won’t be written for some time.

The story of the purchase of a place for services by New London has been recounted by many. Freedman tells the established story that The United Synagogue was building a new congregation around the corner from a building which it had built in 1876. It had been sold to a developer before New London had even been thought of, who was to build 11 flats on the site. For a variety of reasons, he on-sold the property to New London for the same price as he paid. The final transfer of the building from one owner to another has been the story of legend. Freedman tells one story while I heard another. It revolves around the seat in the synagogue which traditionally the Chief Rabbi sat or as Freedman describes it “Episcopal”. It was removed in the “dead of night” so that ‘the boards and cushions which had once graced the *tuches* of the Chief Rabbi to perform the same function for Louis Jacobs.

New London Synagogue became one of a number of what became known as Independent Synagogues, neither under the authority of the Chief Rabbi or affiliated with a synagogue organization of either the left {Reform and Liberal} or the right {Federation and Haredi}. There were some attempts to build a movement around the thought of Louis Jacobs and meetings were held in a number of cities in the UK to discuss possibilities but nothing came of it. In 1974, Louis’ oldest son, Ivor, and a number of like minded younger people established New Highgate and North London Synagogue and subsequently a Masorti Movement has recently emerged.

Those who knew Jacobs would speak of his humility and also his ability to reach others with whom he might not in the normal course of events have crossed paths. Freedman tells of the memorial service Jacobs conducted for Brian Epstein, the Beatles’ manager. There were many of the music industry greats present, including of course the Beatles and their partners. As Freedman notes that it was his “encounter with the Beatles (that) led him to consider the similarities and the differences between transcendental meditation and Jewish mystical techniques.”

Returning to Rabbi Sacks, there is much devoted to their (strained) relationship in the chapter called Personal Belief. Some of what is written there reinforces the picture of Sacks not standing up to the right-wing. Perhaps the pettiest example was when Rabbi Jacobs was not allowed to have a call up at the aufruf of his granddaughter in Bournemouth. They would have offered the honour to an adulterer or someone whose business dealings were extremely shady but not to him.

And Sacks would not deny statements from his Beit Din where they would state that anyone married in a Masorti synagogue may not be considered Jewish even though they could have been married in an Orthodox synagogue, and it was only in a private conversation that Sacks admitted that they were incorrect.

In my first year in rabbinical school, I had both Jacobs and Sacks as my Gemara rebbes/Talmud instructors. Often Sacks would give me a ride home. At the time the Jewish Chronicle offered a weekly space on its communal page called Ask the Rabbi. It was authored anonymously. Sacks would often discuss whether the author was Jacobs.

This is a well-crafted book and it gives a good history of both the life and times of Louis Jacobs. This should be read in conjunction with the writings of Elliott Cosgrove who helps the reader understand the thoughts of Rabbi Jacobs. And of course, there is now a web site devoted to Louis Jacobs’ work.

Author: Harry Freedman

Bloomsbury Continuum, London 2020

Jeffrey Cohen is a Researcher at St Vincent's Private Hospital Sydney. He is a former CEO of the Sydney Jewish Museum. He has been Associate Professor (Adjunct) at Notre Dame Australia School of Medicine (Sydney) and Visiting Senior Research Fellow at UNSW Medicine

Tags: [louis jacobs](https://www.jwire.com.au/tag/louis-jacobs/) (<https://www.jwire.com.au/tag/louis-jacobs/>), [masorti](https://www.jwire.com.au/tag/masorti/) (<https://www.jwire.com.au/tag/masorti/>).