BOOKS

Simon Rocker *considers a life of a reluctant controversialist.* ***Amanda Hopkinson*** *shines a light on a major award for writers and translators*

Belief strengthened by evidence

Reason to Believe – the Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs,
By Harry Freedman
Bloomsbury, £25
Reviewed by Simon Rocker

In late 2005, to mark the 350th anniversary of the resettlement of Jews in England, *JC* readers were invited to choose the "Greatest British Jew". The idea of the poll may have been "quite daft" to the eventual recipient of the accolade but for supporters of Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs, who died just a few months later, it was a testament of his enduring impact.

The "Jacobs Affair" of the 1960s was a seminal moment in British Jewish history. Harry Freedman, a former director of the Assembly of Masorti Synagogues and accomplished author of several books on Judaism, has produced the first biography of the man at its centre, whose quest for truth led to his exile from institutional Orthodoxy.

He was an unlikely rabbi, from a working-class Manchester family that couldn't afford to keep him at high school. His traditional, shul-going father took him to watch rugby league or cricket on Saturday afternoons.

He might have become a printer's apprentice after barmitzvah had not his inspirational cheder teacher, Yonah Balkind, persuaded his father to let him go to Manchester yeshivah and become immersed in the world of talmudic learning. As the youngest member of the new Gateshead Kollel, he was recognised by the influential *musar* (ethics) teacher Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler as an *ilui* (prodigy), and was all set to go to Lithuania to the famous Telz yeshivah when the Second World War broke out.

In an alternative existence, Freedman says, Jacobs might have become a yeshivah head. Instead, needing to earn a living for his young family, he gravitated to the mainstream pulpit.

It was the conversations with his cultured congregants at the New West End Synagogue in Bayswater, who sought a modern approach to Judaism, which led to his writing the short book, *We Have Reason To Believe*, that ultimately unleashed the Jacobs Affair. He had already encountered biblical criticism — which viewed the Torah as a historically composite work rather than dictated word-for-word to Moses — while taking a BA in semitics at University College London and, although some Orthodox scholars kept secular analysis and traditional faith apart, Rabbi Jacobs attempted to reconcile them.

He once wrote an article called, *The Rabbi and the Maharishi*

With a sure grasp of "the fractious politics" of British Jewry, Freedman ably recounts the drama of unfolding events: the manoeuvres of Rabbi Jacobs's supporters who hoped to see him as Chief Rabbi, and the prevarications of an Orthodox establishment that repudiated his views but thought they could make him recant.

As the controversy played out in the national press, his family received abusive phone calls. When his supporters bought the premises of the old St Johns' Wood United Synagogue to found a new congregation, the New London, an intruder broke in with an axe and smashed the chair where the Chief Rabbi used to sit lest Rabbi Jacobs occupy it.

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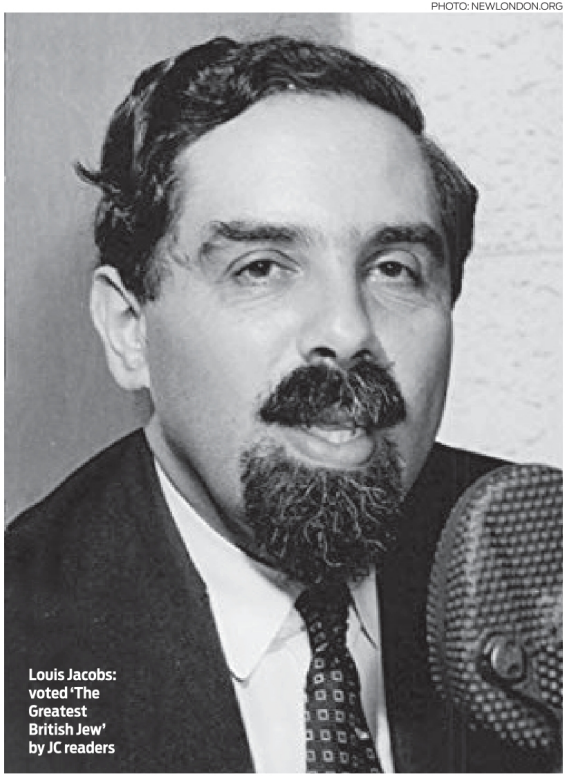

Louis Jacobs: voted 'The Greatest British Jew' by JC readers

As book followed book in his voluminous output, his reputation grew abroad as well as here. His encyclopaedic knowledge enabled him to write on all sorts of subjects. After the Beatles attended the New London for a memorial service for their manager Brian Epstein, he penned an article comparing transcendental meditation with Chasidic contemplation, entitled, *The Maharishi and the Rabbi*.

For all the acclaim, his situation was not without its poignancy. He was ambivalent about the Masorti movement that was founded on his ideas and would rather have remained in a United Synagogue that he had once believed broad-minded enough to accommodate him.

Freedman observes that Jacobs's, "faith in the tolerance of Anglo-Jewry" contrasted with his rejection by the religious hierarchy,

Harry Freedman has written with warmth and understanding of a man whose theology of "liberal supernaturalism" and "halachic non-fundamentalism" charted a new course for traditional Judaism in the UK. A man who could scale the heights of Lubavitch mysticism or fathom the depths of talmudic reasoning in his writing, but who also liked to sit down with a whisky and cigar to watch *Coronation Street*.

Simon Rocker is the JC's Judaism Editor