

Book reveals greatness of Louis Jacobs

Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs, published by Bloomsbury (£17.50)

BY ZVI SOLOMONS

THE week following the burial of the late lamented Rabbi Lord Sacks could not have proven a better one in which to publish the new biography of Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs.

The two rabbis had so much in common, despite their disagreements over the years, notably their erudition, expertise in philosophy and Jewish theology, and skill in putting difficult ideas into words.

They remain the two best English-speaking Jewish educators one could ever have heard speak, and their bibliographies are fascinating and highly distinguished.

I served under Rabbi Sacks; I was brought up with Louis as my fami-

ly's rabbi.

This new book by Dr Harry Freedman brings home aspects of Rabbi Jacobs' life and character which few will have gathered from his own autobiography *Helping with Inquiries*.

Interviews with family and those concerned with the Jacobs Affair, colleagues, and above all extracts from the diaries and letters of Louis and his wife Shula convey their delight at his worldwide fame, speaker tours of America and long distinguished career in great clarity.

The story of the Jacobs Affair has been rehearsed many times over, notably by the late Chaim Bermant in his book on Anglo-Jewry *Troubled Eden* as well as the autobiography.

The centrality of this event in his life is obvious and cannot be escaped.

However partisan the reader may be, one is left here with the feeling that the whole business was sorely mis-

managed on both sides.

Dr Freedman provides details which allow the Jacobs Affair to be set in the context of British Jewry in the late 1950s and early to mid 1960s — an era of smoky rooms in Woburn House and stiff, awkward communication.

For example, in his own book Rabbi Jacobs glosses somewhat over the interview he was summoned to by Dayan Abramsky in 1949, aged only 29, for the jobs of dayan of the Beth Din and minister of Bronesbury Synagogue, to replace Dayan Swift who was moving to South Africa.

Dr Freedman's account beautifully conveys the bemusement of Jacobs, at an interview so secret that the interviewee is unaware that they are even being interviewed, let alone for what purpose!

The book reveals a fair picture, too, of Louis the international scholar, his speaking tours of America, his

academic career in Britain of which the ordinary "Jew in the Pew" will have little knowledge.

Nor does it shy away from the strength, many might say stubbornness, of the man's character which enabled him to stand firm in his academic and religious ideas at a time when those less strong might have retracted what they had already published in black and white.

This, of course, spilled over into his pulpit at the New London.

I remember on one occasion at a kiddush given for one of his three retirements, Louis saying quietly to me: "I only ever wanted to be Rabbi of the New London Synagogue", characteristically toning it down when speaking aloud to the assembled community.

"I only ever wanted to be a rabbi."

One could hear the echoes of the Jacobs Affair, perhaps, in his voice again: "I only ever wanted to be Rabbi of the New West End Synagogue."

The rabbinic dictum holds that the shy cannot learn Torah. However, this is perhaps a paradox in Louis Jacobs, a painfully shy man, despite his steely resolve in that great academic and Jewish "quest" as he called it.

Of course, Dr Freedman, a former director of Masorti in the UK, has provided us with a fond portrait of a friend; nonetheless he has not shied away from some uncomfortable aspects, particularly the

extreme reluctance of Louis to found a movement despite his fierce defence of it in the face of attacks from other directions within Judaism.

He chronicles Louis finally letting go of his pulpit at the third attempt with accuracy, detail and love, and without the hagiographical tendency we see in some rabbinic biographies.

One wonders what other information regarding his relations with the Chief Rabbi's office, the Beth Din, and other rabbis not included in the book may well still exist, which could possibly shed light on

this most interesting of lives.

One suspects that, given the high sensitivity of our Orthodox authorities to any mention of his name, any of that which still remains will lie buried in the archives for another biographer to dig up a century hence.

One aspect of Rabbi Jacobs which will surprise those unfamiliar with his story is that he was the expert witness whom the Chabad Lubavitch movement credit with saving their library.

Dr Freedman chronicles this episode, having clearly read through all the 1986 New York Supreme Court case in great detail.

To this day Lubavitch chassidim honour him for his evidence, despite his theology.

The biography also reminds us that Rabbi Jacobs was much cherished in his formative years in the charedi community which nurtured his Torah learning, as an *ilui* (genius) and particularly by the great Rabbi Dessler who recruited him as the youngest member of the first-ever kollel at Gateshead in the 1940s.

Louis used to get many letters from students at yeshiva, asking abstruse points of law on difficult passages in the Talmud.

One, he once informed me, wrote asking a serious question, but at the same time requesting that he not respond by breaking Shabbat.

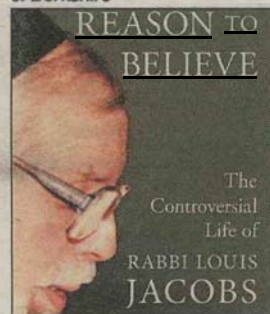
Louis was hurt. Being pious, he would never consider doing such a thing, at any time. *Reason to Believe* chronicles this aspect of his life.

The book opens and pretty much closes with

the accolade accorded Louis in 2006 by a poll of newspaper readers, the greatest ever British Jew, which made Rabbi Jacobs feel a "bit daft".

We too perhaps should feel the irony that the name of a great scholar is today absent from the institutions which nurtured the first flowering of his prodigious talent.

■ Zvi Solomons is Rabbi of JCoB, the Jewish Community of Berkshire



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