A tale of two legendary English rabbis

COLIN SHINDLER reflects on Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a prodigy from the world of the yeshiva, whose legacy was the elephant in the room for many in Rabbi Sacks' United Synagogue

THE SUDDEN DEATH of the respected former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks elicited an outpouring of grief. Last month also saw the publication of a new biography of Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a revered and venerated Talmudic scholar in Britain.

This ironic juxtaposition brought back memories of a controversy within British Jewry over 50 years ago which led to a schism within mainstream Orthodoxy. It stemmed from Rabbi Jacobs's interpretation of *Torah min Hashamayim* (Torah from Heaven). He had long argued that our understanding of revelation at Sinai evolved in parallel with our critical faculties — and thereby Jews should be open to the hard questions, often raised by biblical criticism and archaeological discovery.

Jacobs argued that 'many of the greatest Jews throughout the ages believed that reason should be our guide and should even be applied to Revelation itself'. His opponents pointed to the Talmudic adage that someone who does not believe that every letter in the Bible was given by God to Moses at Sinai is a heretic and forfeits his share in the world to come.

Even so, Joseph Hertz, the Chief Rabbi from 1913-46, had argued about the meaning of "from" in 'Torah from Heaven'. He pointed out that it would be conceived "differently by different groups of believers" — although he did not entertain any exploration of Biblical Criticism. Many British Jews asked the question of where does the red line lie between logic and faith? Many others did not ask.

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Outside of any theological dispute, many felt that the mild-mannered Rabbi Jacobs had been treated most unfairly. The Chief Rabbi at the time, Israel Brodie, who had refused to appoint Jacobs as Principal of the main rabbinic college, Jews College, further barred his return to the pulpit at his former synagogue.

All this led to a secession of Louis Jacobs' supporters from the United Synagogue. This was in part a breaking away of its intellectual wing. They believed that there would be more space for Jews to think creatively and not to be constrained by the often rigid parameters of communal life.

While some broke away, others remained. Stalwarts of the United Synagogue such as the communal leader and philanthropist, the late Fred Worms, believed the Jacobs Affair was a great tragedy for the Jewish community — almost a comedy of chance errors and flawed decisions.

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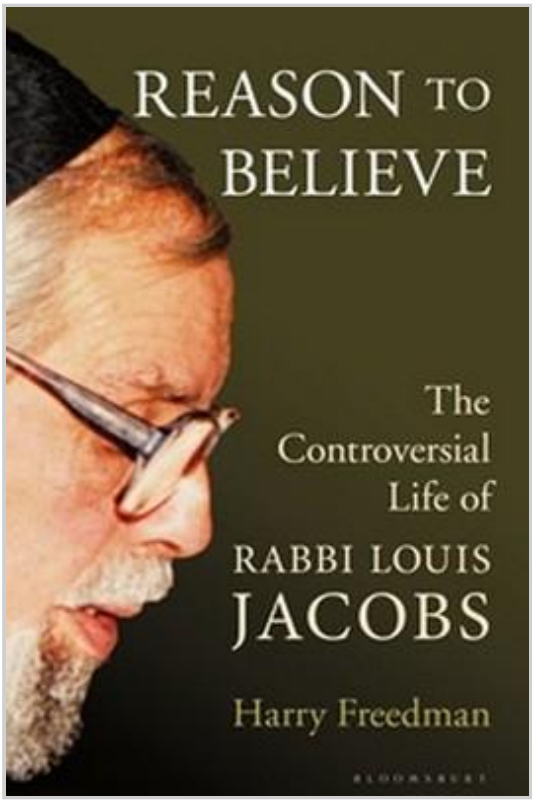
He wrote that Louis Jacobs enunciated “what the vast majority of members of the United Synagogue were thinking, namely that the Torah was not dictated word for word by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, but an inspired work, written down by Moses and subsequent redactors — another version of *Torah min Hashamayim”*.

It was also a time, as Harry Freedman argues in his well-researched book, *Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs,* when “new money replaced old”. The authority of Sir Isaac Wolfson, who had supported the United Synagogue through a period of financial adversity, was central to the outcome of the Jacobs Affair. Wolfson had grown up in the Gorbals in Scotland, the son of a Polish-Jewish cabinetmaker. He ended his life as the first Baron Wolfson of Marylebone.



Rabbi Jacobs, an *ilui* (child prodigy) from the world of the yeshiva, was thus always the elephant in the room for many in the United Synagogue.

When Jonathan Sacks became Chief Rabbi in 1991, Fred Worms enthusiastically believed that this historic breach could be healed now that a dynamic, Cambridge-educated intellectual with a mellifluous and inspiring rhetoric was in post. Yet while Jonathan Sacks proved to be a wonderful mentor for many young people on their Jewish journey, a prestigious writer of a plethora of books, the captivator of the non-Jewish world, the breach remained.

It was perhaps a reflection of how the community in Britain had changed — outside of any Judaic theological arguments.

Louis Jacobs and Jonathan Sacks were men of their times. Louis Jacobs did not aspire to become a communal leader, much less a Chief Rabbi. He was an independent thinker and always considered himself

an Orthodox Jew who enjoyed study and the intellectual exploration of problems.

He looked to the world of East European Judaism and was scheduled to study at the Telz yeshiva in Lithuania when World War II broke out in 1939. He preferred not to be labelled either as United Synagogue or the breakaway Masorti movement — of whom he was seen as its spiritual leader. His learning was admired by his supporters and feared by his opponents.

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Jonathan Sacks had different aspirations. He wanted to promote the modern orthodoxy of the United Synagogue within the community, reclaim acculturated and assimilated Jewish writers and academics, nationalise Judaism so that it could be proclaimed in the non-Jewish world.

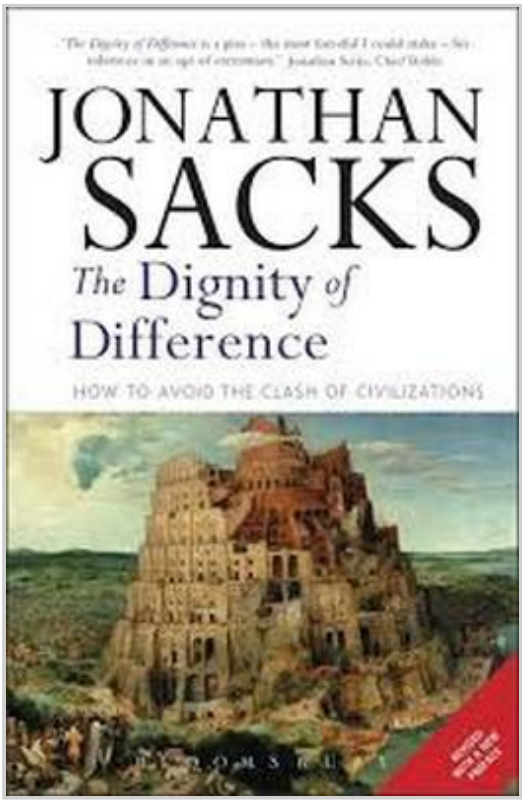
Many adherents of other religions warmed to his insights and erudition in the media. Indeed, both Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace and Boris Johnson in the House of Commons recently paid tribute to his contribution. All this greatly impressed British Jews.

Yet Louis Jacobs and Jonathan Sacks were of different generations — and different Anglo-Jewries. Louis Jacobs's teachings and openness were seen as a refuge from the onward march of ultra-Orthodoxy, where God transitioned from God to G-d to Hashem.

In the decline of Zionist idealism and the decreasing belief in socialist collectivism, the easy clarity of the ultra-Orthodox world emerged as a container for many struggling with the issues of identity and belonging. This was a central problem for Jonathan Sacks as Chief Rabbi. He had to straddle many Jewish worlds — for some he was Jonathan Henry, for others he was Reb Yonoson.

> **Jacobs would not have thrived in the messy politics of the community, but he would have stood firm against the advance of the Haredim — because he came from that world and possessed the learning and the will to challenge them.**

In his first decade as Chief Rabbi, he made mistakes and learned that he would have to become a political pragmatist. This meant compromise and apology when necessary — the end would always justify the means. After some sharp criticism, Rabbi Sacks edited his book, *The Dignity of Difference* (published in 2002), to produce a second edition in 2003, omitting passages which would not offend those of the religious Right. Louis Jacobs found this profoundly distasteful. For him, it was affront to intellectual integrity.



At the outset of his tenure as Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks promoted the ‘Traditional Alternatives’ gatherings in London in order to revitalise traditional Jewry — and also as a means of both rivalling and promoting the ethos of the Limmud annual conference within orthodoxy. Such projects lasted only for a short period, but it did lay the basis for the highly successful London School of Jewish Studies.

Ultra-Orthodoxy had few qualms about undermining the United Synagogue and diminishing its standing. There was always a concern that issues of Jewish status would be challenged in a general disenfranchisement of the United Synagogue.

While Rabbi Sacks had been close to the religious peace camp in Israel in the 1980s, he was also cautious about airing his views. A believer in the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), he told the BBC in 2002 that he believed in a two-state solution.

While he gloried in the Bnei Akiva youth group, he was determined not to make the same mistakes as his predecessor, Immanuel Jakobovits, who courageously and unhesitatingly aligned himself with Israeli doves — and earned the unfair opprobrium of many communal leaders during the Begin and Shamir years. Rabbi Sacks’ pronouncements on Israel were low key and the utterings of the United Synagogue *sotte voce*.

Rabbi Jacobs never wanted to become Chief Rabbi — even though some expected that he should assume this post. As someone who disdained the pomp and circumstance of high office, he would have been supremely unsuitable. Yet one of the “what ifs” asked, is how would Anglo-Jewish history have been different if Louis Jacobs had indeed become Chief Rabbi?

He would not have thrived in the messy politics of the community, but he would have stood firm against the advance of the Haredim — because he came from that world and possessed the learning and the will to

challenge them.

Louis Jacobs died in 2006 and was deeply mourned. Had he become Chief Rabbi, who would have succeeded him? In all likelihood, it would have been Jonathan Sacks — but it would have been a different Jonathan Sacks and a different Jewish community.

Both men contributed tremendously to the Jewish world. May their memories be for a blessing.

Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs by Harry Freedman is published by Bloomsbury.

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Photo: Rabbi Louis Jacobs (left) and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks