

# The Louis Jacobs conundrum

Reconciling modern scholarship with unquestioning faith



PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu and wife Sara meet with heads of the London Jewish community in 2017. Rabbi Louis Jacobs was one of England's leading rabbis.

(Kobi Gideon/GPO)

• NEVILLE TELLER

Britain's Anglo-Jewish community dates its formal birth from a declaration in 1656 by the then-autocratic ruler of England, Oliver Cromwell — the man who instigated and won a civil war, executed the king and established a republic with himself at its head. Anglo-Jewry's subsequent 365-year history boasts a multitude of eminent individuals, but in all that time no more controversial a figure has arisen than Rabbi Louis Jacobs.

ume was that revelation need not be taken literally.

As Freedman explains, Jacobs maintained that there had never been a universally accepted view of how God's word had been revealed, nor, since the 12th century, agreement that the entire Torah was revealed word for word to Moses.

That the Torah was the word of God Jacobs believed implicitly, but he maintained with equal vigor that it was legitimate to believe that the Almighty could have revealed the sacred text over time through a number of divinely inspired individuals. Modern Bible scholarship indicated that this may well have occurred. In short, Torah *min hashamayim* (Torah from Heaven) the Bible certainly was, but the route by which it reached us was open to discussion.

In 1961 Jacobs was a tutor at Jews College, the renowned training ground for the UK's community rabbis, a post he had accepted on the understanding that he would take over as principal when the then-head retired. As the time approached, however, his way was blocked by chief Rabbi Israel Brodie. A member of the Beth Din had taken the trouble to read and ponder on what Jacobs had written four years before. Now he advised the chief rabbi that Jacobs's views rendered him ineligible for the post.

Freedman provides a spirited account of the subsequent furor.

"The affair hit the national press," he writes, and describes the storm of comment, within and outside the Jewish community, that ensued. It ran on for months and, in a sense, persisted for the rest of Jacobs's life.

The "Jacobs Affair" shook Anglo-Jewry to its very core, and robbed Jacobs of any professional career within the auspices of the United Synagogue (US), the religious organization to which the vast majority of British Jews belonged.

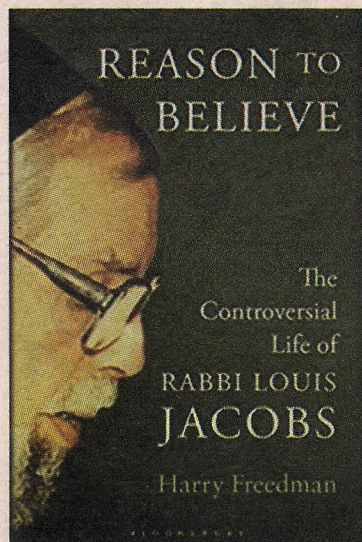
The enigma at the heart of Jacobs's career is perhaps illustrated by the fact that nearly 40 years later nothing had greatly changed. Even though Jacobs had established his own synagogue, the New London, and a few congregations had broken away and followed him, the US still dominated the Jewish religious scene.

In 2005 the *Jewish Chronicle*, the UK's old-established and leading Jewish journal, ran an extended campaign to discover whom the Anglo-Jewish community regarded as "the greatest



## REASON TO BELIEVE

By Harry Freedman  
Bloomsbury Continuum  
304 pages; \$35



The title chosen by Harry Freedman for his absorbing and insightful account of Jacobs's life echoes that of the volume by Jacobs himself which lies at the heart of his strife-ridden public career, *We Have Reason to Believe*. Jacobs's unceasing battles with the Orthodox Jewish establishment that followed its publication in 1957 are encapsulated in that title — his attempt, futile in the event, to reconcile reason with belief, modern inquiring scholarship with traditional unquestioning faith.

BORN IN 1920 to a working-class Jewish family in Manchester, Jacobs attended Orthodox yeshivot in his home city and then Gateshead, impressing his tutors with his intellectual and scholastic brilliance. Quickly earning a double semicha (the rabbinic qualification), he moved from a period in the celebrated Munk's synagogue in London's Golders Green to the enormously prestigious New West End Synagogue in the heart of London, which numbered the great and the good of Anglo-Jewry among its congregation.

The dynamite that came to be known as the "Jacobs Affair" had a long fuse. When *We Have Reason to Believe* first appeared in print, it attracted little comment. Four eventful years followed until what Jacobs had written suddenly assumed toxic significance.

The fundamental belief of traditional Judaism is revelation that the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, is the word of God, dictated direct to Moses on Mount Sinai. In Orthodox eyes, the truly pernicious assertion lodged in Jacobs's slim vol-

um, *We Have Reason to Believe*, was that the Torah was not the word of God but the work of a human hand. A long list of names was whittled down to just a few, and in the final vote the winner, beating Moses Montefiore, was Rabbi Louis Jacobs the man denounced as a heretic and spurned by the Jewish Orthodox establishment. Yet at the age of 85 he was lauded by Anglo-Jewry and regarded by most as "the best chief rabbi we never had."

Freedman quotes the *Jewish Chronicle*'s renowned commentator Chaim Bermant: "Anglo-Jewry is very English, and the controversy died down long before everyone was quite sure what it was about."

In the final analysis it was about the impossibility that Jacobs found in reconciling the results of unimpeachable scholarship with the unquestioning adherence to faith-based beliefs demanded by Orthodoxy an exercise that the majority of Anglo-Jewry clearly did not find over-burdensome to their consciences. So while he was universally hailed as an outstanding theologian, preacher, teacher and spiritual guide, only comparatively few followed Jacobs out of the old-established US into his independent synagogue and eventually his breakaway Masorti movement.

*Reason to Believe* is eminently readable as an account of Jacobs's life with all its triumphs and disasters, yet Freedman's greater achievement is the clarity he brings to Jacobs's profoundly held beliefs. Freedman traces the development of his convictions, illustrating their origins and illuminating the often unfamiliar and profound religious and scholastic issues that engaged Jacobs's attention for so much of his life.

*Reason to Believe* is highly recommended. ■