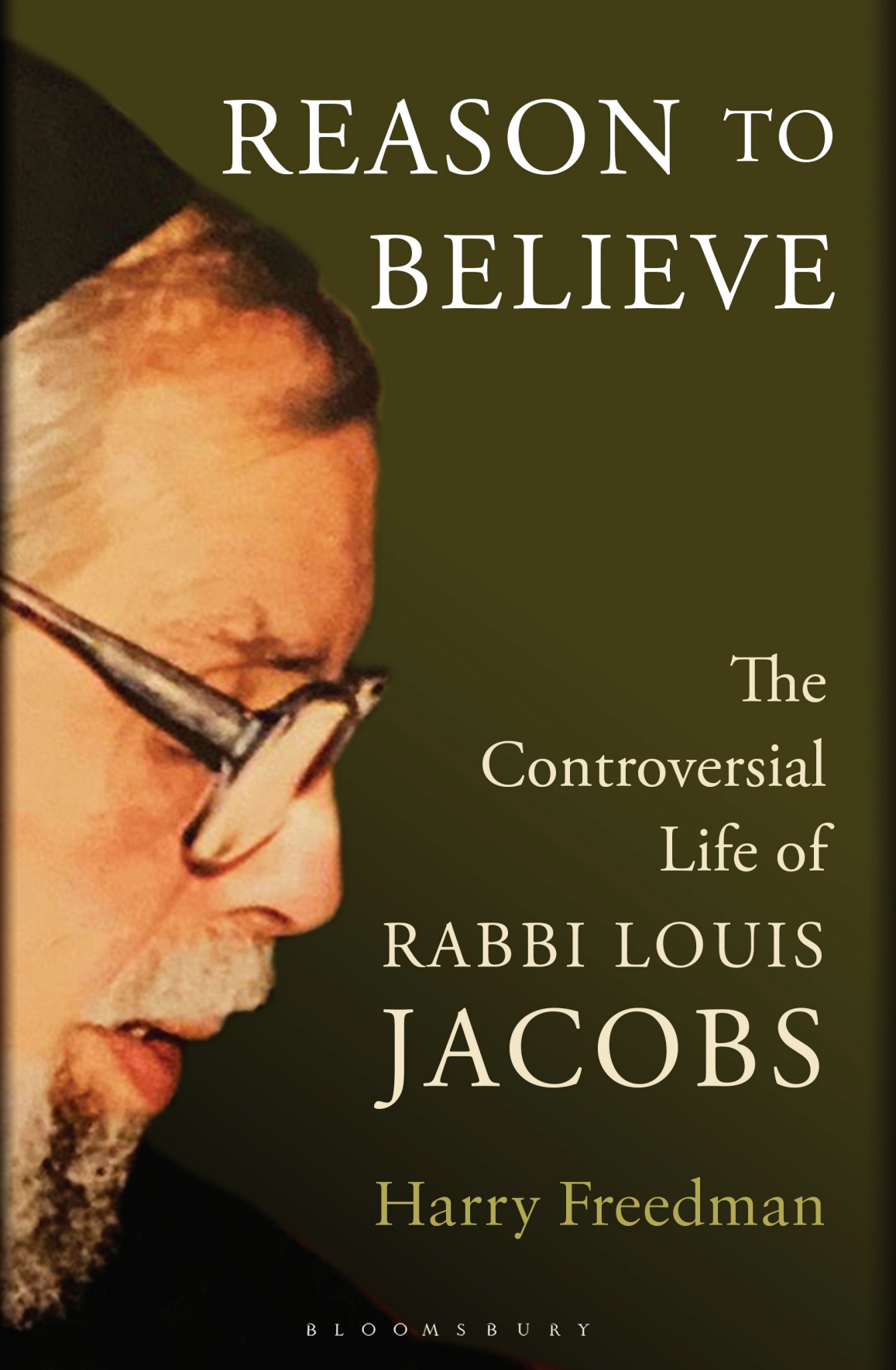

# REASON TO BELIEVE

## The Controversial Life of RABBI LOUIS JACOBS

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For Bonnie and Leo: Two new stories unfolding.

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# Introduction

In 2005 the *Jewish Chronicle* conducted a poll of its readers to mark 350 years since Oliver Cromwell allowed the Jews to return to England. The newspaper aimed to highlight the contribution made by the Jewish community to national life, by asking its readers to decide who they thought had been the 'Greatest British Jew'.

Over the next six weeks the paper suggested candidates from the fields of science, art, entertainment, sport and philanthropy. Among the names they suggested were those of Benjamin Disraeli, Isaiah Berlin, Harold Pinter, Rosalind Franklin, Lucien Freud, Chaim Weitzmann, Simon Marks of Marks and Spencer, Montague Burton the tailor and Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs. Readers were also invited to nominate candidates of their own choosing.

An initial field of nearly 100 names was whittled down to a shortlist of eight, from whom readers were asked to make a final choice. When Louis Jacobs won the competition, winning nearly twice as many votes as the nearest runner-up, he said with characteristic modesty that he felt 'both embarrassed and daft'.

Contributors to the *Jewish Chronicle*'s letters page were not so reticent. One naysayer described Jacobs as a 'pariah' and 'highly destructive', whose victory was 'bizarre and irrelevant'. Another correspondent thought that the poll results had made a 'mockery of Anglo-Jewish history'. These remarks were condemned in a letter the following week as illustrative of 'the festering tumour that is infecting Anglo-Jewry today'. But by far the largest number of letters simply celebrated his victory, correspondents writing of the 'tears of joy' they had shed when they'd heard the news, praising

his intellect and condemning the 'obscurantists' who opposed him. Not for the first time in his career, Louis Jacobs had unwittingly divided the community.

Unlike previous occasions, the divisions did not focus on his theology or religious outlook. This time, it was personal. On one side were those who, even if they had never met him, held him in deep affection. On the other side those who, even if they had never read his works or heard him speak, were offended by opinions that others claimed, often mistakenly, that he held.

For his opponents, his victory was a reminder, if they cared, that by ostracizing him all those years ago they had alienated a large part of their community, enhanced his scholarly reputation and guaranteed his popularity. But in the main they did not care. Religious certitude brooks no compromise.

For his supporters, Louis Jacobs's victory was a vindication. For the best part of half a century he had been an outcast from the Orthodox community that had once hailed him as a genius, their brightest and most promising hope for the future. Spurned by those who could not reconcile his theology with the established creed, nor accept his refusal to compromise when it came to matters of the mind. Disparaged by former colleagues and students, who considered the conclusions he reached through intellectual prowess and depth of learning to threaten their traditions and the religious commitment of their congregations. They feared his reputation as a man of reason, a spiritual leader with his feet on the ground, a theologian who spoke the language of ordinary people, a polymath with a depth of knowledge unequalled in the British rabbinate. And perhaps most of all, since we are talking about Britain, an underdog who had been unfairly treated and who was, in words echoed by a *Jewish Chronicle* columnist, 'the best Chief Rabbi we never had'.[1]

At last, with his victory in the poll, over 40 years after the notorious 'Jacobs Affair', Louis Jacobs's congregants and supporters could claim with justification that they had been right all along, when they had said that their teacher, guide and mentor had always held a special place in the hearts of the British Jewish community. Even if, as he himself was the first to admit, only

one-third of 1 per cent of the community had actually bothered to participate in the poll.[2]

For Louis Jacobs and his family, the accolade of Greatest British Jew, embarrassing and daft as it may have been, helped to ameliorate a long-standing hurt. Sadly though, it came too late to gladden the heart of their beloved Shula, his wife of 61 years, his guide and greatest ally. She had passed away just six weeks earlier. As a young bride she had been advised by one of his teachers, as if she needed any telling, that her new husband was a genius; her role, this rabbi said, was to nurture him so he could devote every waking moment to his studies. But Shula Jacobs, born Sophie Lisagorsky, had a greater insight. 'For him it was the learning, more and more. I felt it was not right and I kept pressing him to give, to teach others and not keep it all to himself.' Louis Jacobs's scholarly reputation, dozens of books, hundreds of articles and countless hours of lecturing all stem from Shula's insistence that he not keep it all to himself.[3]

Much has been written about Louis Jacobs, and much more will be. Books, articles and PhD theses analyse his thought, discuss his contribution to the various fields of Jewish scholarship in which he was active, talk about his place in the history of British Jewry – even the personal impact he made upon the lives of those he encountered. In this book I have tried to write about Louis Jacobs the man: to chronicle his life and illuminate, to the best of my ability, his personality. I was privileged to have known him for nearly the whole of my life, to regard him both as a teacher and a family friend, and to rely on his wisdom and assistance at critical moments.

Many people knew Louis Jacobs, and he was known by many names. To his family and his friends in Manchester and Gateshead he was known by his Yiddish name, Laib, or Laibel. When he settled in London he became Louis, pronounced as in French (it had always been his name, but he had rarely used it). To those who addressed him with traditional formality he was always Rabbi Jacobs, even socially; to opponents who wished to denigrate him he was merely Dr Jacobs. To most of the world, most of the time, he

was Louis. I found myself referring to him by each of these titles, depending on where it was in the story. But much of the time I refer to him as Louis; it may not be the most respectful way to denote one's rabbi and teacher, but, given the aims of the book, it felt like the right thing to do.

# 1

# An Unlikely Rabbi

Louis Jacobs was an unlikely rabbi. Rabbis, like kings and mafia bosses, tend to be the products of dynasties, their ancestry almost as important as their depth of learning. Louis Jacobs was no dynastic scion; his DNA was not that of a rabbinic elite.

That is not to say he was a stranger to religion. His parents were traditional Jews, as were most people in the North Manchester working-class Jewish community into which he was born, on 17 July 1920. With his father Harry, the young Louis would go to synagogue every week, recite *kiddush* on Friday nights and say the Grace after Meals. He attended *ḥeder*, religious school, several times a week and following his bar mitzvah he put on *tefillin* every weekday. But on Saturday afternoons, although such things are forbidden, his father would take him in the winter to watch Broughton Rangers, the local rugby team, and in the summer to see Lancashire play cricket at Old Trafford.

Many years later, when the divisive Jacobs Affair was playing out in the British press, the *Daily Express* printed a picture of his father, proudly speaking about his son. Harry Jacobs was shown sporting a large black skullcap on his head. In the cutting that Shula Jacobs placed in her scrapbook Louis has scrawled underneath: 'Not a true picture! It's a put up job.' Harry Jacobs, according to his son, would never have allowed himself to be photographed wearing a skullcap. The Jacobs family were traditional English Jews. They only wore skullcaps, or *cupel*s, when praying, or sometimes when

eating. They did not don them for secular activities in the middle of the week. Unless being interviewed by a journalist working for the *Daily Express*.

Louis's parents tempered their Judaism with typical English reserve. But they themselves had been brought up in a far stricter religious environment. No *shabbes* afternoon rugby or cricket for Harry Jacobs as a child – of that Louis's paternal grandfather believed he had made certain. But somehow, in their teenage years, Louis's dad and two brothers managed to slip away to the rugby most Saturday afternoons. Such desecration of the holy Sabbath would have been inconceivable in Telz, where both his paternal grandparents were born, a Lithuanian centre of Orthodoxy renowned for its yeshiva, or Talmudic college. Nor could it have been imagined even in the slightly more Westernized city of Mittau, in Latvia, the birthplace of his mother's parents.

Both sets of grandparents left their ancestral lands during the 1880s, seeking a better, safer, more prosperous future in England. They ended up in Manchester, where their children, Louis's parents, were born. Harry Jacobs and his future wife Lena Meyerstone were both educated in Manchester Jews' School. In 1910 they were married in the city's Great Synagogue. Then they waited ten years for Louis – Laib as he was known in Manchester, their only child – to arrive.

## A MANCHESTER BOY

There was never any doubt that Louis would turn out to be intelligent. It was only their penurious upbringing and the social inequalities of Victorian England that had held his parents back. Even though his mother's older brothers had done well for themselves in Manchester, one establishing himself as a clothes retailer, the other as a jeweller, it was unthinkable that Lena could follow in their footsteps. As an unmoneyed woman all routes to her social advancement were closed. She concentrated instead on advancing her own self-education, and on developing her son's potential. With her prodigious memory and passion for English

literature she supplemented Louis's schooling, spending hours together with him reading Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia* and reciting the huge chunks of poetry she had memorized. Louis inherited her photographic memory and love of reading. As a young man he devoured books, spending hours in the local library reading whatever he could get his hands on, fiction as well as non-fiction. His favourites were the outstanding Edwardian authors, among them George Bernard Shaw, Hilaire Belloc and H. G. Wells. Overshadowing them all, in his mind, was G. K. Chesterton, with 'his brilliant paradoxes and defence of traditional religion, even though it was not the Jewish religion and indeed he was rumoured to be a bit anti-Semitic'.[1] With the easy simplicity of his writing conveying ideas that demanded the reader's active engagement, Chesterton was perhaps Jacobs's earliest literary role model; he would weave his epithets into his sermons and lectures whenever he could.

Louis's father's intellectual potential had also been constrained by the circumstances of his upbringing. As a child he had won a scholarship to the renowned Manchester Grammar School. But he'd been unable to take up his place, because his family needed him as a breadwinner. He worked as a machinist in raincoat factories, compensating for the lack of cerebral stimulation by attending political lectures and advocating in disputes on behalf of his work colleagues.

For a while it looked as if Louis's luck would be no better than that of his parents. Illness and poverty took a toll on his education. He was shunted from school to school, attending a total of five altogether. When his first school closed he was sent to Manchester Jews' School, where his parents had been educated. Established in 1838 to provide an education for Jewish children in the city, the school provided free clothes and meals, teaching manual trades and shorthand to its pupils alongside religious instruction.[2] But it was some distance away from where they lived, and following an attack of appendicitis at the age of eight his parents decided he was no longer strong enough to manage the walk. They enrolled him in the third of his five schools, this one nearer home.

At the age of 11 he won a place at Manchester Central High, acclaimed in the competitive Jewish community as nearly the best school in the city, second only to Manchester Grammar. But his parents couldn't afford to keep him there, so by the age of 14 he found himself at his fifth, and final school. On the whole he received an adequate, if fragmented, education, enough to equip him for a trade that might produce a modest income and help alleviate the family's impecuniousness. Had he not been fortunate enough to live in a town blessed with a remarkable Jewish teacher, such a trade was more than likely to have been his destiny.

Yonah Balkind opened his *heder*, a Hebrew school for young boys, in Manchester at the age of 19. He taught there for nearly 70 years. A phenomenally gifted teacher, who had never formally learned how to teach, Balkind's reputation is legendary amongst his former students, collectively known as 'Balkind boys'. His was not the first *heder* that the young Louis Jacobs attended; his parents had sent him to several before enrolling him at Balkind's. All would have been pretty austere places, usually just a room (the word *heder* means room) equipped with desks, some musty books, and a teacher or two reliant on a strap or ruler to keep discipline. Very few pupils found these places inspirational, but attendance a few times a week at after-school *heder* was an obligatory chore for young, nominally observant, Jewish boys in pre-war Manchester. Louis would have found one *heder* much like another. Until he walked into Balkind's. It changed his life.

Louis Jacobs described Yonah Balkind as the man he always considered to be his teacher par excellence. He made learning fun. Not simply because the *heder* doubled as a boys' club, offering billiards and table tennis alongside religious education. Rather it was Balkind's enthusiastic, practical pedagogy that captured his students' attention; play-acting biblical passages with them, holding speed-reading competitions, and most importantly sitting down with each pupil individually to ensure they had fully absorbed the day's instruction.

Learning at Balkind's was fun, and Louis was in his element. He was probably not even surprised when, immediately after his

bar mitzvah, Balkind asked him if he had thought of going to Manchester Yeshiva. It was a question rarely asked of most 13-year-old, not particularly observant boys. But Balkind had long been aware that this was no ordinary 13-year-old boy.

Manchester Yeshiva was a college exclusively for young men deeply immersed in their Jewish learning. Some would go on to be rabbis, others would carry their learning with them in whichever direction life would take them. For the older students, yeshiva life was an all-consuming full-time experience, devoted almost exclusively to the study of the Talmud. But the yeshiva also ran an after-school class for younger pupils, with a curriculum that included Bible study, grammar and history. Aimed at boys unlike Louis, from strictly observant homes who would graduate to the full-time yeshiva when they left school, it was a much more immersive educational experience than he had been used to, either at school or at Balkind's. Religiously, it was far less compromising than anything he had ever known. But he loved the intensity of study, scarcely noticing that it was drawing him into a cloistered world of strict religious observance; a world that for a while would be his natural home. He always retained an affection for this strictly observant world, for the manner in which it submerged him so deeply into the depths of Jewish learning and personal piety. He never lost his lingering affection for those strictly observant communities in which he could so easily have spent his life. Had he not, as he grew older, come to consider them as medieval in their understanding and ahistorical in their outlook.

Like many young people newly exposed to intense forms of religion, Jacobs went through a phase in which he became, in his words, 'an insufferable little prig and religious fanatic'.[3] His parents were bewildered by the change in their son, by his scrupulous observance, his intolerance of anything bordering on the moderate and the demands his religious needs placed upon the household. No doubt they began to regret ever sending him to the yeshiva. But his fanaticism didn't last. Looking back, he came to believe that his lifelong intolerance of extremism was a reaction to that short, intense period.

Neither Jacobs nor his parents expected him to remain at the yeshiva beyond the age of 14, when compulsory schooling ended and young men of limited means started to earn a living. His father had negotiated an apprenticeship for him with a local printer, and had it not been for the intervention of his yeshiva teachers, that would have been his trade. Harry Jacobs did not take kindly to their suggestion that Jacobs remain in full-time education at the yeshiva; he had no intention of seeing his son become a rabbi. Nor was he particularly impressed by their assurance that the rabbinate was not the only career path open to him: Louis could, his teachers improbably suggested, become a religious journalist instead. But Jacobs senior had never forgotten how his own education had been cut short due to poverty, and he was too wise to allow the same thing to happen to his son. So, no doubt reluctantly, he agreed that Louis could become one of the 30 or so full-time students at the yeshiva. Like his biblical namesake, the young Jacobs laboured day and night for the next seven years.

## MANCHESTER YESHIVA

Jacobs's teachers had always known that he was a pupil of exceptional promise. But it is one thing to excel at lessons, to be the sharpest kid in the class, impressing with one's intellect. It is quite another for students to take such an interest in their subjects that they not only seek out background material but immerse themselves in advanced, complex topics way beyond the demands of their curriculum.

So, it is likely that when the head of Manchester Yeshiva gave Louis Jacobs a book to thank him for helping to dust his library before Passover, he may have pictured the young student dipping into it from time to time. He almost certainly never imagined that Jacobs would devour Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman's somewhat specialized notes to the Talmud to such an extent that he would soon be able to master the precise, didactic methods of analysis practised in the Lithuanian yeshivas.

When not engaged in the core yeshiva activity of unsupervised Talmud study with a fellow student, Jacobs worked his way

through the books in the seminary's library. He took an especial interest in collections of Responsa, often highly technical books, containing a particular sage's written answers to legal enquiries he had been sent. He was captivated by one compilation in particular, the Responsa of the sixteenth-century Egyptian legal authority Rabbi David ibn Abi Zimra, a prolific writer who composed over 2,000 replies to questioners. Jacobs, who rarely forgot anything he had read, retained a particularly strong memory of this work. Its clarity, simplicity and precision, even when treating complex theological matters, made a deep impression on him. They were the very qualities that shaped his own thinking, qualities which would define his own writing style and make his works easy to read. Forty years later, when writing his book *Theology in the Responsa*, he recognized that ibn Zimra's work, which he had found and studied on his own so long ago in the yeshiva, had been his inspiration.[4]

There were only two full-time teachers in the yeshiva. Rabbi Moshe Yitzhak Segal, the head, or *Rosh Yeshiva*, was, in the eyes of his students, a stern, forbidding figure. Jacobs developed a tremendous respect for the man's piety, though he said he never felt comfortable in his presence. For Jacobs, Segal's piety was best illustrated by his respect for his students while he prayed. Unlike many rabbis, he did not expect his congregation to wait patiently for him until he finished the private prayer that he often recited slowly and with intense concentration. It was a small thing, but for the young Louis Jacobs, who had not so long ago gone through his own intense phase of religious fanaticism, it was a lesson in how to temper piety with respect for others.

Rabbi Segal had been educated in the Novardok Yeshiva in Russia. The school subscribed to the puritan *musar* tradition in Judaism, an approach which, amongst other things, encouraged the profound internalization of ethical texts, through constant repetition and memorization, as a pathway to character improvement and religious piety. It was a severe upbringing, which, in attempting to produce upright, irreproachable, God-fearing individuals, severely suppressed spontaneity and enthusiasm. This was the environment that Segal had been taught in, and it shaped his personality and

pedagogical approach. Fortunately for the students at Manchester Yeshiva, and for Louis Jacobs in particular, the only other full-time teacher at the yeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchok Dubov, a Czechoslovakian Hasid, provided a perfect counterweight to the austere Segal.

It was Rabbi Dubov, as jovial and exuberant as a Hasid should be, who injected a spirit of joy and passion into the otherwise dry atmosphere of the yeshiva. A member of the mystically inclined, life-affirming Habad sect, Dubov sparked Jacobs's lifelong fascination with Kabbalah and Hasidism, subjects on which he would write prolifically throughout his career. In later life Jacobs would keep a picture of Rabbi Dubov on his study door.

What neither Dubov nor Jacobs could know at the time, but which they would have both found ironic, is that half a century later Jacobs would become an unlikely hero to the, by now greatly enlarged, burgeoning Habad movement. His testimony on their behalf in a dramatic, widely publicized New York trial confirmed the movement's legal ownership of their previous rabbi's library, against the claims of his grandson. The account of the trial, to which we will return in due course, would have been a fitting addition to Rabbi Dubov's repertoire of Hasid tales. With his story telling, melodious voice and joyful, mystical demeanour, Rabbi Dubov commanded the respect of his students. But his easygoing manner meant that he was never held in the same sense of awe as was the strictly formal Rabbi Segal, the head of the yeshiva.

Although physically located in Manchester, the yeshiva was spiritually and emotionally rooted in the world of Eastern European Orthodoxy, a world so soon to be tragically destroyed. Louis's grandparents had been part of that world. His parents had stepped away from it, into middle-of-the-road, traditional English Judaism. Now Louis was travelling back. His teachers and fellow students at the yeshiva, and the rabbis he came across in his daily life, were dismissive of the formality of the Anglo-Jewish establishment, its 'English' rabbis (even in Scotland) with their Anglican demeanour, canonicals, dog collars and sermons delivered in a 'foreign' language (by which they meant English). It is another irony of his life that Louis Jacobs would not just end up as an 'English' rabbi but as

the custodian of what he would call the 'Anglo-Jewish tradition'. Cleaving to its genteel formality throughout his career, even when the vast majority of traditional British synagogues were creeping back towards something that more closely conformed, in form if not in spirit, to the now obliterated customs of bygone Eastern European communities.

## THE KOLEL IN GATESHEAD

Jacobs had no inkling in 1939 that he would one day become a custodian of the old Anglo-Jewish tradition. He would probably have laughed, had he been told. He'd been at Manchester Yeshiva for several years, and had a growing feeling that there was nothing more he could accomplish there. He was becoming increasingly interested in the methods of Talmud study practised in the Telz Yeshiva in Lithuania, the town where his paternal grandparents had come from, the methods he had read about in Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman's book. These methods, which stressed the importance of understanding the deeper meaning of texts, rather than just their superficial argumentation, demanded extreme analytical acuity – a skill he had begun to possess and wished to develop.

He was drawn to Telz, partly by his intellectual interest and the family connection, but more profoundly by a sense that there was some sort of mystical force leading him there. It first manifested when he won a book of essays published by the Telz Yeshiva, and he felt it again when Rabbi Dubov asked him to comment on an essay written by his son who was studying there. That he was being propelled towards a preordained destiny in Telz was confirmed in his mind when an emissary of its yeshiva providentially appeared in Manchester to recruit students. He met Jacobs and offered him a place as a student. His family's inability to afford the cost of sending him would be no obstacle: Louis was already so highly regarded as a student of promise that the emissary agreed to waive all fees.

Jacobs's education had already progressed so far beyond his parents' comprehension that they did not even try to stop him. He obtained a visa from the Lithuanian consulate in Manchester

and began to prepare for the journey. But mystically ordained fates are peculiar things; they don't always deliver what they promise. Jacobs's destiny was not to be realized, and a good thing it was too. Britain declared war on Germany, all travel plans were thrown into confusion, and his future in Telz, where in 1941 all Jewish life was obliterated, was off the agenda. Though it wouldn't be the case for millions of others, the Second World War literally saved Louis's life.

Unable to travel to Telz yet still feeling that Manchester Yeshiva had little more to offer him, Jacobs cast around for another institution able to cater to his intellectual needs. He wrote to the rabbi of Sunderland, who was said to have known all 37 volumes of the Talmud, nearly 2 million words, by heart. Louis asked if he could become his private pupil. It was a highly speculative request, and of course Louis had no money or collateral to underwrite his application. As things turned out it was probably fortuitous that he received no reply. For it was just as Louis was feeling most downcast that he was invited to take part in a pioneering initiative, led by a man who he would always say was the most influential teacher of his life.

Eliyahu Dessler had arrived in England from Lithuania in 1928. He had taken up a rabbinic post in North London until the outbreak of the Second World War, when evacuations, military call-ups and the traumas of war dispersed the members of his community. In 1941 he received a letter from Gateshead in the North of England. It came from David Dryan, a pioneer of Orthodox education who had established a yeshiva in the town some years earlier. Reports were beginning to arrive of the Nazi persecution of European Jewry, and although for some years the scale of the slaughter would be not only unknown but beyond all imagination, Dryan realized that the days of the outstanding rabbinic colleges in Eastern Europe were almost certainly numbered. Anxious to save lives, provide a refuge for displaced scholars and ensure the continuity of Torah study, Dryan resolved to establish a centre in Gateshead where those who were too advanced for the town's yeshiva could study. He invited 20 leading rabbinic scholars to join him. When Dessler received Dryan's letter he responded with alacrity.

These days, in Strictly Orthodox communities, it is not unusual to find elite institutions where mature students engage in full-time advanced Talmudic study supported by philanthropic donations. But such establishments, known as kolels, are a relatively recent innovation; they were virtually unknown before the twentieth century. Few would have rated the chances of successfully opening a kolel in 1941, in the darkest days of the Second World War, in a remote town in the North of England with a relatively small Jewish population. But few founders of a kolel could match the commitment and enthusiasm of David Dryan, or of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler.

Louis joined the Gateshead Kolel just a few weeks after it opened. He was the youngest of the 20 members, the only one who had not studied in a European yeshiva, and indeed the only one who came from a middle-of-the-road, Anglo-Jewish family rather than a background steeped in the minutiae of religious observance and unfathomable depths of learning. He was also probably the only one who had even heard of G. K. Chesterton, certainly the only Kolel member familiar with his works. But from its very inception Gateshead Kolel was intended to be an elite institution, catering only to the most powerful intellects in the rarefied world of Strictly Orthodox Jewish learning. Louis Jacobs – or Laib as he was still known – would never have been admitted if he had not been held in the highest regard; despite his age and upbringing he was considered to be a scholar of outstanding potential. He self-deprecatingly described himself as the 'babe of the kolel', who was treated with an 'amused tolerance', but his peers and teachers are likely to have thought otherwise.[5]

Although in its early days all members of the kolel were nominally regarded as equal, there is no doubt that the intellectual powerhouse, the man to whom all deferred, was Rabbi Dessler. Steeped in the severe *musar* tradition, with its emphasis on scrupulous ethical rigour, he is now acclaimed as one of the great thinkers of mid-twentieth-century world Jewry. To the young Jacobs he was an inspirational teacher, whose discourses reached levels of philosophical enquiry, mystical speculation and spiritual