

# Britain's Chief Rabbis and the religious character of Anglo-Jewry, 1880–1970



**BENJAMIN J. ELTON**

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Benjamin J. Elton  
London



## Part I

# Religious and historical context



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

IN AN UNFINISHED autobiography Immanuel Jakobovits, Chief Rabbi 1967–91, described a visit he made to Chief Rabbi J.H. Hertz, when Jakobovits was minister of the Brondesbury Synagogue. Jakobovits was experiencing difficulties and went to Hertz for advice. Hertz responded: ‘If you multiply your *tsores* [troubles] by a hundred, you will know what I am going through’.<sup>1</sup> Jakobovits came to know exactly what Hertz meant, when he became Chief Rabbi himself, although whether Hertz’s reply was of much help at the time is a different matter. This anecdote highlights one of the paradoxes of the British Chief Rabbinate. Historically, it has carried enormous prestige but it has also brought with it difficulties and worries for the incumbent; in many ways it carries the advantages and disadvantages of any synagogue pulpit, only magnified. A Chief Rabbi needs many attributes if he is to make a success of his office, including tact and diplomacy, persuasive skill, administrative ability and a solid grounding in Jewish learning. He also needs to have a view of what Judaism is and ought to be, what Jews should believe and how Jews should behave – in other words, a theology.

This book is an analysis of Britain’s Chief Rabbis over the ninety years between 1880 and 1970, and the impact they made upon Anglo-Jewry’s religious character. In attempting this analysis I examine the theologies of the Chief Rabbis and their contemporaries in depth. So much attention will be paid to theology because, I argue, the key to understanding why individuals took certain actions, why they opposed some individuals and movements and supported others, is differing theologies. Two synagogues could hold a near-identical service, two rabbis could each dress in robes and preach in mellifluous English, yet fierce arguments could rage between them because of their differing theologies. Similarly, a highly acculturated Jewish religious leader could appear to have little in common with a traditional rabbi, yet the two could each regard the other as a partner in the same enterprise, defending and

upholding what they regarded as traditional Judaism. For example, an analysis based on religious styles would lead a historian to identify the pre-War United Synagogue and Louis Jacobs' New London Synagogue of the 1960s and after, as almost identical institutions. An analysis based on theology shows how different they were, and therefore why Louis Jacobs could not remain in the United Synagogue, and indeed never could have found a place there.

The Jacobs Affair is therefore an important and illuminating episode, which I thoroughly examine, but its significance for this study is in what it allows us to say about the Chief Rabbis as a whole, not as an isolated incident. For my theological analysis also helps explain why such highly traditional figures as Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spector regarded the Anglicised Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler as an authentic Jewish religious figure, when an examination of religious style would show that they had very little in common. An examination of religious style is essential, but it is insufficient. A much fuller understanding comes from incorporating a serious study of theology, and that is the task of this study.

The theology of Britain's Chief Rabbis has either not been regarded as particularly significant, or has been identified as less traditional than one would expect from a rabbinical leader in the classical mode.<sup>2</sup> Alderman, for example, has referred to Hermann Adler's 'intellectual limitations' whereas Hervey Meirovich argues strongly that Hertz was what would today be described as a 'Conservative Jew'.<sup>3</sup> This study subjects those claims to detailed analysis. I investigate the theology of the Chief Rabbis between 1880 and 1970 by looking at their statements and religious policies. I examine themes of continuity and change in the Chief Rabbis' theology, assess the degree of ideological movement over the period and try to explain what I find. Finally, I place the Chief Rabbis' theology in its intellectual context, to see where their approach fits into the spectrum of Jewish religious responses to modernity, which emerged following the Enlightenment and Jewish Emancipation.<sup>4</sup> To help do that, I suggest an outline of a general typology, and locate the Chief Rabbis and those of similar attitudes within that typology.

My analysis suggests that, as well as being highly consistent, the Chief Rabbis' theology was more interesting than has often been considered and more worthy of consideration than it has been credited for thus far. The changes in religious policy should be attributed, I argue, more to changes in the lay leadership than changes in the Chief Rabbinate itself. I suggest that there were important changes in the religious complexion of the community, but the Chief Rabbis were beneficiaries of that change, rather than part of it – that is, they did not become inclined

to greater stringency, but rather it became possible to implement the stringencies they favoured.

I begin my study with Nathan Marcus Adler, Chief Rabbi from 1845, but my intensive analysis starts in 1880 when Hermann Adler became Delegate Chief Rabbi on his father's semi-retirement to Brighton. Hermann Adler became Chief Rabbi after his father's death in 1890 and served until his death in 1911. The second Chief Rabbi I examine closely is Joseph Herman Hertz, appointed in 1913, who held the office until he died in 1946. The insights into Adler and Hertz's theology enable us to place in proper context their successor as Chief Rabbi, Israel Brodie, who assumed the office in 1948 and held it until 1965. Finally, I examine the election of Immanuel Jakobovits, Chief Rabbi 1967–91, and his early years in office.<sup>5</sup>

The British Chief Rabbis have not been a primary focus of historians of Anglo-Jewry. There is no full-length scholarly analysis of any Chief Rabbi, let alone the office as a whole. The pioneering narrative work was undertaken by Cecil Roth who contributed a chapter on Nathan and Hermann Adler and Joseph Hertz to a book edited by Leo Jung on *Jewish leaders*.<sup>6</sup> This remains an invaluable source of basic information, but it is a descriptive rather than an analytical piece. This tradition was continued by Derek Taylor in his *British Chief Rabbis, 1664–2006*, which is a survey of all the Hahamim and Chief Rabbis, including the ones I examine.<sup>7</sup> Taylor is generally sympathetic to the Chief Rabbis, and credits them with the dominance of traditional Judaism in Britain.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, Meir Persoff has published *Faith against reason: religious reform and the British Chief Rabbinate, 1840–1990*, which is in essence an excellent collection of primary sources on the Chief Rabbis and their more radical opponents in the Jewish community, linked with explanatory narrative.<sup>9</sup> There is some analysis, either in the form of quotations from historians or Persoff's own, but as Todd Endelman writes in the introduction, the book tends to leave 'the reader to reach his or her own judgment'.<sup>10</sup>

Otherwise, the historiography does not emphasise the contribution of the Chief Rabbinate to the development of Anglo-Jewry. The major studies on the history of the Jews in England touch only briefly on the contributions of the Chief Rabbis, and argue that the Chief Rabbis were not a major factor in the development of Anglo-Jewry. Geoffrey Alderman's *Modern British Jewry* deals in some (though not great) detail with the history of the British Chief Rabbinate.<sup>11</sup> Todd M. Endelman's *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* is equally important, and I consider these two works first.<sup>12</sup> As this study questions many



aspects of the existing historiography, I quote extensively from their works, so that it is absolutely clear what they have said, in their own words, and therefore what I am contesting.

Alderman is extremely critical of all the Chief Rabbis we examine. He states, for example, that Hermann Adler was 'an object of ridicule and contempt' among the immigrant community.<sup>13</sup> He also argues that Hermann Adler was 'more accommodating' than his father and permitted many modifications which 'could just about be reconciled to orthodoxy in the loosest sense' with the exception of mixed choirs, which were forbidden by Jewish law, but which Hermann Adler permitted anyway.<sup>14</sup> Alderman argues that even those modifications that did not directly break Jewish law would still have been condemned by eastern European rabbis, but were permitted by Adler in order to keep the community together.<sup>15</sup> I examine the reasons, so far as they can be determined, for Hermann Adler's decisions, and how he took into account Jewish Law in order to understand why he acted as he did and whether it was because he held to low halakhic standards or as a result of a more considered strategy. The reasons why Hermann Adler was more accommodating than his father are important to understanding both Adlers' approach to communal leadership.

Alderman depicts Hermann Adler's adherence to classic Jewish beliefs as lukewarm, for example in his remark that the views of Morris Joseph, who became minister of the West London Synagogue, were 'damned *even* in the eyes of Hermann Adler' [emphasis added] implying that even if Adler was not prepared to accept Joseph (for reasons I examine) he was prepared to countenance some untraditional thinking.<sup>16</sup> We will see whether this claim is supported by Adler's theological statements and actions prompted by theological motives. Alderman is extremely critical of Adler's policy of centralising religious authority, which he argues 'contributed much to the erosion of his status and standing', and of what he argues was his negative attitude towards the more traditional and recently immigrant Jews.<sup>17</sup> Alderman asserts that Adler's Beth Din was of a poor standard, refers to his 'religious latitudinarianism' and casts doubt upon Adler's level of Jewish learning.<sup>18</sup> Alderman's verdict is that 'a wiser man, knowing his own intellectual limitations, would have acted with circumspection and diplomacy' particularly with Machzike Hadath.<sup>19</sup> To test this statement I investigate the level of Adler's learning, that of his *dayyanim*, the degree to which he imposed a policy of religious centralisation and why, and his relationship with immigrant Jews, who, Alderman contests, regarded Adler as 'an object of ridicule and contempt'.<sup>20</sup>

Alderman identifies J.H. Hertz as an exponent of 'progressive con-

servatism', which Alderman holds is not a traditional theological position. He argues that Hertz wished to contain even Reform under the umbrella of the Chief Rabbinate but found his 'middle-of-the-road' ideology under attack from European refugees like Julius Jakobovits, Isidore Grunfeld, Alexander Altmann and Yehezkel Abramsky.<sup>21</sup> Alderman suggests that, after the marriage of his daughter Judith to Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld of the Adath Yisroel, Hertz came under his influence and moved to a more traditionalist position.<sup>22</sup> I examine what Hertz meant by 'progressive conservatism' and assess what Hertz's policies implied about his theology. How far Hertz's tolerance towards Jewish religious movements extended indicates those to whom Hertz felt he could offer shelter under his umbrella. When evaluating the influence of immigrant rabbis I look briefly at their religious views and the reasons why they took a leading role in Anglo-Jewry. Finally, to judge whether Schonfeld was responsible for Hertz's increased traditionalism, I examine whether Hertz did indeed become more traditional.

Alderman argues that Brodie was 'neither a scholar nor an original thinker' and so was in awe of his Beth Din and allowed himself to be dominated by them.<sup>23</sup> This is the basis of Alderman's approach to the Jacobs Affair. He argues that Jacobs' New London Synagogue is, in form at least, essentially identical to the pre-war United Synagogue, but that the United Synagogue underwent a 'relentless move to the right' to a more traditionalist position, which meant that Jacobs' theology was out of place by the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> An investigation of this analysis is bound to form a large part of any examination of the twentieth-century Chief Rabbinate. I look into Brodie's theology, his scholarship, his relationship with his *dayyanim* and the role they took in decision-making. I also examine the central thesis that Jacobs' views would have been at home in the United Synagogue of Hermann Adler and J.H. Hertz, and that a shift towards traditionalism left him in confrontation with a transformed organisation.

There are major areas of broad agreement between Endelman and Alderman. They both argue, for example, that the Chief Rabbinate moved to a more traditionalist position under pressure from bodies such as the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations after the Second World War, when the latitudinarianism of the Adler and Hertz regimes was replaced by a stricter regime.<sup>25</sup> However, Endelman is more nuanced and seeks to uncover more of the wider implications of the activities of the Chief Rabbis. He emphasises how the Chief Rabbis were perceived by the traditionalist immigrants, rather than asserting what they were, as Alderman does. Endelman acknowledges the success of the Chief Rabbis in maintaining communal unity, but

highlights the price at which, he argues, it was bought: 'by centralising religious authority and preventing the emergence of an independent, native born rabbinate, Alder . . . helped to guarantee the institutional hegemony of Orthodox Judaism in Britain . . . However, this achievement was not without its downside. The stifling of religious innovation robbed communal life of the intellectual ferment that accompanied the debate about Reform in more open, pluralistic communities . . . [this] reinforced its [Britain's] status as a cultural backwater'.<sup>26</sup>

Ruderman noted this aspect of Endelman's approach to Anglo-Jewish history in the context of the eighteenth century and the *Haskalah*, and traced it to Endelman's appreciation of the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s, which rejected the privileging of intellectual over social history, and held that important historical development need not be the result of consciously thought-through ideology.<sup>27</sup> His *Jewish enlightenment in an English key* takes issue with Endelman's downplaying of the intellectual aspect of Anglo-Jewish history in the eighteenth century and seeks to revise the prevailing understanding. In many ways this study tries to do the same from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, by considering, the extent to which Britain was, in Jewish terms, a cultural backwater.

Endelman comments about Hertz's Beth Din appointments that 'in 1935 they [the highly traditional] gained a foothold on the London Bet Din when Hertz appointed Rabbi Yehezkel Abramsky . . . despite opposition from the United Synagogue, whose leaders recognised that Abramsky's fundamentalism was out of step with mainstream Anglo-Jewish practice. Abramsky . . . moved the bet din in a conservative direction.' Endelman argues that once he was in place Abramsky asserted himself over Hertz, implying that Hertz was less traditional than Abramsky, and perhaps even opposed Abramsky's policies, but was powerless to prevent them.<sup>28</sup> Persoff agrees with this assessment and suggests that from the 1940s onwards the Beth Din moved from a subordinate to a more assertive stance in its relationship with the Chief Rabbinate.<sup>29</sup> I will examine the relationship between Hertz and the *dayyanim*, to assess this statement, and also the relationship between Abramsky's ideology and that of the leaders (religious and lay) and members of the United Synagogue.

Regarding relations between the traditional rabbinate and other Jewish denominations Endelman writes: 'the polarisation of Anglo-Jewish religious life took on both trivial and not so trivial forms. Orthodox rabbis refused to appear on platforms with Reform or Liberal rabbis' and 'Chief Rabbis Brodie [and] Jakobovits . . . attacked liberal forms of Judaism in terms that encouraged polarisation'.<sup>30</sup> We will have

to determine whether there was a movement to greater opposition to these 'liberal' sections of Anglo-Jewry or whether we can uncover themes of continuity.

Endelman's verdict, that 'Chief Rabbi Brodie, whose English bearing and speech outweighed his learning and who thus was easily influenced by his dayyanim', is much the same as Alderman's.<sup>31</sup> His suggestion that Brodie's veto over Jacobs' appointment 'was unprecedented: previous chief rabbis never imposed an ideological test in certifying congregational appointments' can be tested very simply.<sup>32</sup> The suggestion that 'the Masorti movement . . . embodied the moderate traditionalism of the prewar United Synagogue' goes further than Alderman.<sup>33</sup> I show that this is a valid judgement, if religious practice is used as the sole or dominant criterion. However, I argue that greater emphasis should be placed on theology than has generally been the case. Once different individuals are analysed in terms of their theological views, rather than solely or predominantly their religious practices, the actions they took and the disputes between them make more sense. This different analytical approach leads to a different conclusion from Endelman's.

More broadly, and elsewhere, Endelman has written of 'the decline of moderate traditionalism in Anglo-Jewish practice, and the ascendancy of right-wing views and standards . . . counter to the easygoing latitudinarianism' of the early 1900s.<sup>34</sup> He attributes much of this movement to a changed and more traditional lay leadership and community, and this part of his analysis is indisputable. William Rubinstein makes a similar point when he writes that the Jacobs Affair showed 'increasing anti-liberal tendencies within the United Synagogue' and that Jacobs' 'position was that of the United Synagogue mainstream a generation before', although even amongst the laity I want to distinguish between the leadership and the rank and file.<sup>35</sup> However, Endelman goes further and argues that 'the outlook of the Chief Rabbinate and the United Synagogue [under Adler and Hertz] was latitudinarian, undemanding, concerned more with unity, respectability and civility than differentiating between "authentic" and "inauthentic" forms of Judaism' but that this was overturned because 'the religious atmosphere shifted rightwards' between those days and the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> Persoff concurs, and has written that 'during the Chief Rabbinate of Israel Brodie conservatism overpowered progressivism in the hearts and minds of the centrist establishment'.<sup>37</sup> These are judgements not just about the community or the lay leaders but about the Chief Rabbis themselves. They ascribe a more liberal theological and halakhic stance to the early Chief Rabbis and a greater strictness to their successors. That is a view that this study will question.

V.D. Lipman's attitude to the Chief Rabbinate is the most sympathetic. Lipman argues that Hermann Adler came under the heavy influence of lay leaders, but he maintained services in United Synagogues that 'did not deviate from the minimum requirements of orthodoxy' with the exception of mixed choirs.<sup>38</sup> Israel Finestein concurs with this judgement in his study of Hermann Adler, in his *Anglo-Jewry in changing times*.<sup>39</sup> Persoff challenges the widely shared notion that Adler's liturgical reforms were successful in maintaining a high level of allegiance to traditional Judaism. He writes that his modifications of 1892 'appeared to fail in their purpose [as] looks manifest in the foundation of the Jewish Religious Union some ten years later'.<sup>40</sup> I therefore examine the extent of Adler's achievement.

There are a number of other important studies. Bernard Homa's essential history of Machzike Hadath, *A fortress in Anglo-Jewry*, and Julius Jung's *Champions of orthodoxy* are highly polemical, written to celebrate Machzike Hadath and the Federation of Synagogues respectively. Their central thesis is that the Chief Rabbis were weak in learning and suspect in theology, and that they presided over religious laxity which the leaders of the new organisation found unacceptable and rose up to oppose.<sup>41</sup> David Englander's brilliant essay *Anglicized not Anglican: Jews and Judaism in Victorian Britain* looks at Anglo-Jewry too much through the prism of Marxist history, but is often extremely insightful; this study uses a number of ideas found there.<sup>42</sup>

Miri Freud Kandel's pioneering work, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913: an ideology forsaken* covers Hertz, Brodie and Jakobovits, and reiterates many of the themes of change in the Chief Rabbinate laid out by Alderman and Endelman. She argues that Hertz advocated a synthesis of Jewish and non-Jewish wisdom, although Jewish values always took priority and determined which non-Jewish ideas could be accepted.<sup>43</sup> She suggests that this was the result of Hertz's rejection both of 'right wing' tendencies (espoused by the Adath Yisroel and others), which denied the value of non-Jewish wisdom, and of the approach of lay leaders such as Robert Waley Cohen, whose 'spiritist' attitude emphasised the spirit over the letter of the law.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to these two groups, Hertz strove to develop an ideology that would form a bridge between East End and West End, native and immigrant, and, most importantly, equip young Jews from traditional backgrounds confronted with secular scholarship to retain loyalty to Judaism.<sup>45</sup>

Freud Kandel argues that after Hertz's death in 1946 his successor, Israel Brodie, forsook this ideology. She argues that the right-wing section of the community grew in assertiveness, in particular Dayan Abramsky, who was keen to assert his authority over the community

and took from Brodie the halakhic supremacy that Chief Rabbis had previously enjoyed and made the Chief Rabbi subservient to the Beth Din.<sup>46</sup> Brodie, she argues, was essentially non-intellectual and without a positive theology of his own. This made him particularly susceptible to the influence of the right wing.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the impact of the Holocaust made Brodie fearful of the non-Jewish world and its values.<sup>48</sup> Thus 'under Brodie the influence of the right wing was being allowed to exert itself on mainstream Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy in a manner that had never previously been possible'.<sup>49</sup> She highlights in particular the replacement of Hertz's ideology of synthesis with one of 'compartmentalization', which the Adath largely, if not entirely, espoused.<sup>50</sup> This asserted that engagement in the non-Jewish world might be necessary for the purposes of making a living, but was otherwise illegitimate.<sup>51</sup>

This shift, Freud Kandel argues, had huge implications for Louis Jacobs. Jacobs, like Hertz, argued for a synthesis, although Hertz would not have agreed with Jacobs about the Pentateuch.<sup>52</sup> However, because of Brodie's weakness in the face of the right wing, the ascendancy of the Beth Din and the increased traditionalism of the lay leadership, 'the theological position espoused by Jacobs . . . had come to be officially marginalized'.<sup>53</sup> Jacobs was thus left stranded by changes in the theology of the Chief Rabbinate and United Synagogue. As Freud Kandel concludes, 'by defining the theology of Jacobs as outside the confines of the Orthodoxy advocated within the mainstream institutions of the community, the theological position of the Chief Rabbinate and United Synagogue became more rigid, representative of a far smaller section of the religious spectrum in Anglo-Jewry'.<sup>54</sup>

I undertake a close analysis of Freud Kandel's argument, in particular whether Hertz's ideology was perceived by him to be a bridge between the opposing approaches he found in Britain or a more positive construction with deeper roots, whether Brodie was indeed non-intellectual or, in fact, possessed a theology. We will see whether the 'right wing' of the Adath under the Schonfelds or the Golders Green Beth Hamedrash did indeed advocate compartmentalisation and whether Brodie was weak in the face of the pressure they applied, and *vis-à-vis* the Beth Din. The questions of whether the Chief Rabbinate changed its ideology as a result of all this, and whether the placing of Jacobs' theology as beyond the pale was a departure from previous attitudes are particularly important and form a major focus of this study, because they have become a central piece of evidence used by those who make this argument, and therefore a case to test the whole weight of my argument.

A very important work on Hertz is Harvey Meirovich's study, *Vindication of Judaism: the polemics of the Hertz Pentateuch*.

Meirovich's analysis of the Hertz *Pentateuch* is groundbreaking and perceptive, and this study will make much use of his work on Hertz's attitude towards Hellenism, other religions and Liberal Judaism. Meirovich argues in that work that Hertz was a Conservative Jew, by which he means that he deviated from classical Jewish tradition on issues such as the origin of Jewish texts and the nature of Jewish Law.<sup>55</sup> In doing so, like Freud Kandel, he makes the case for placing the pre-War United Synagogue and Louis Jacobs in the same camp on a theological basis, in parallel, as it were, with Alderman and Endelman who do so more on the basis of practice. Meirovich argues that Hertz belonged to the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school, what Moshe Davis called the Historical School, which he defines as untraditional because of their application of critical methods to the study of post-Biblical material, particularly the Talmud. Meirovich hints that the major reason why Hertz and his teachers did not apply the same scientific methods to the *Pentateuch* was that it would undermine the counter-attack against the antisemitic Bible scholars led by Julius Wellhausen, who used their analysis of the *Pentateuch* to attack Judaism, and would thus lead young Jews to lose faith.<sup>56</sup>

Meirovich's second point is that the Historical School, to which Hertz belonged, understood the evolving nature of Jewish law and therefore denied the final authority of the sixteenth-century code of Jewish Law, the *Shulhan Arukh*.<sup>57</sup> Meirovich quotes Hertz's teacher Morais as saying in 1875 that a new code, taking into account changed conditions, needed to be written. Meirovich also points out Hertz's belief in the sanctifying power of history and tradition, and therefore identifies him as a follower of Zachariah Frankel, founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, which Meirovich argues was opposed to the traditional theology of Samson Raphael Hirsch and Esriel Hildesheimer. He quotes Hertz's public declarations of allegiance to positive historical Judaism, and his respect for the Breslau Seminary.<sup>58</sup>

Meirovich points out that Hertz crystallised this theological position into 'progressive conservatism', defined as 'religious advance without loss of traditional Jewish values and without estrangement from the collective consciousness of the House of Israel'.<sup>59</sup> Finally Meirovich highlights Hertz's continued association with the Jewish Theological Seminary under Schechter's leadership and that of his successors, Cyrus Adler and Louis Finkelstein, and in particular Hertz's close friendship with and admiration for Solomon Schechter himself.<sup>60</sup> I will seek to carry out an extensive examination of Hertz's theology to test Meirovich's argument.

The views on the Chief Rabbis already mentioned also find expression



in less major works. Aubrey Newman delivered a lecture on Hertz, to mark the centenary of his birth, in which he describes Hermann Adler as ‘an English gentleman, externally an English clergyman . . . as much at home in the Athenaeum as in the Synagogue, and had almost as much in common with the higher ranks of the Anglican clergy of his day as the Anglican clergy themselves’.<sup>61</sup> Newman emphasises Hertz’s traditionalism and insistence on the classic religious principles of Judaism, points I expand upon, but he also suggests that Hertz did come under the influence of his *dayyanim*, Schonfeld and others later in life, which pulled him further from the vision of ‘progressive conservatism’ which he laid out earlier in his Chief Rabbinate.<sup>62</sup> Pamela Shatzkes’ book *Holocaust and rescue* contains a short *en passant* description of Hertz, which is close to that which this study arrives at. She highlights his ‘commitment to Jewish values’, saying that he was ‘deeply committed to the preservation of Judaism and Jewish scholarship and ‘an uncompromising representative of the religious cause’.<sup>63</sup> Another work which does not concentrate on the Chief Rabbis, but mentions them and their contribution, is Stefan Reif’s *Judaism and Hebrew prayer*. He credits the Chief Rabbis with creating the hegemony they enjoyed, writing that they ‘ensured that they retained the loyalty of the majority of the community, withstood significant encroachment from Reform and Eastern European Orthodox and remained the “umbrella” organisations for traditional Judaism that was a unique feature of Anglo-Jewry’. This Reif attributes to ‘a shift of the central institutions towards the left’.<sup>64</sup>

The view of a general move towards increased traditionalism is found in other sources. In his 1962 survey of Anglo-Jewish religious life, Norman Cohen drew two portraits. The first was of the Anglo-Jewish minister of the 1920s and 1930s, ‘Reverend [i.e. without rabbinic ordination] X’ who ‘carried his umbrella on the Sabbath [in violation of the laws of the Sabbath] and was very broadminded about the dietary laws’. He compared this character with the contemporary United Synagogue minister, now ‘Rabbi Y’ who ‘comports himself in an orthodox pattern’.<sup>65</sup> Cohen talked also of the ‘ascendancy of the right wing’ in the United Synagogue.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere, commenting on the causes of the Jacobs Affair, Cohen wrote ‘the old easy going tolerance was being relentlessly edged out. Freedom of opinion was diminishing and, to qualify for respectability, a doctrine had to meet the most stringent requirements of rigidity’.<sup>67</sup> Fifteen years later, the then Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, wrote that ‘at several important levels the gulf between [the United Synagogue, and more traditionalist groupings] is gradually narrowing’. Jakobovits meant that the United Synagogue was becoming more traditional.<sup>68</sup> There are a number of important articles that



supply a great deal of useful evidence, for example, Stephen Sharot's 'Synagogue service in London, 1870–1914' in the *Jewish Journal of Sociology* and John Shaftesley's 'Religious controversies' in Levin (ed) *A century of Anglo-Jewish life*. I bring evidence from these studies to test the arguments advanced in the survey works I have just reviewed.

If I can show that there was theological continuity in the Chief Rabbinate, that it was consistently traditional and that religious policy was aimed at preserving adherence to tradition, we can amend and revise the judgements in the major works on the Chief Rabbis. If I can suggest that they were able interpreters of Jewish tradition who tried to create a coherent synthesis of traditional and modern scholarship and forge a response to modernity that did not sacrifice what they regarded as indispensable religious principle, then I hope I can deepen the understanding of the Chief Rabbis and of Judaism in the UK because of the central role the Chief Rabbis played.

This may help to answer the major question of why institutional Judaism in England has remained so traditional and has such a high proportion of the Jewish population as (at least nominal) adherents. We may find that in addition to other social, cultural and political factors, which historians have well explored, the policies of the Chief Rabbis, which have not been as emphasised, played an important part. I also reconsider the role of British Jewry in the development of Judaism, particularly traditional Judaism, in the world as a whole in the last hundred and fifty years, for there are intellectual and ideological connections between the Chief Rabbis and Jewish religious leaders trying to confront the same issues and problems. This may reveal that Britain was not a 'cultural backwater' in this period but played a part in developments in Judaism on an international level.

The historiography on the development of traditional Judaism as it encountered modernity is vital for our understanding of the British Chief Rabbis. The challenges involved in upholding religious authority in an age of reason that were faced around the Jewish world were faced too by Britain's Chief Rabbis. The response of some Jewish leaders is well known – for example, the eastern European rabbis who rejected the modern world and its trappings. However, it is more useful to examine such leaders as Esriel Hildeseimer and S.R. Hirsch in Germany, and Sabato Morais and H. Pereira Mendes in America, who did not simply reject modernity but sought to come to an accommodation with it, within their conception of authentic Judaism.

As well as placing the Chief Rabbis within this wider context, this book also argues that the Anglo-Jewish experience as a whole is worthy of examination alongside the German and American experiences and

that, despite the diverse contexts, it slots nicely into the established literature on traditional Judaism in Germany, France and the USA, as a different but comparable case. There are many points of reference in the career of Hildesheimer, as analysed in David Ellenson's outstanding studies, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* and *After Emancipation*, which show how traditionalist Jewish leaders can be analysed and understood. Mordechai Breuer's *Modernity within tradition* shows how traditional Judaism developed in Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which will illuminate our study of Anglo-Jewry, while Michael Meyer's *Judaism within modernity* looks at all streams, not restricted to Germany, and is equally enlightening. Marc Shapiro's *Between the yeshiva world and modern orthodoxy: the life and times of Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg* stands alongside Ellenson's work on Hildesheimer as a model of biographical writing on a traditional Jewish leader. Moshe Davis' *The emergence of Conservative Judaism: the Historical School in 19th-century America* provides many instructive American parallels to developments in Britain, while Jack Wertheimer's *Tradition renewed* and Robert Fierstein's *A new spirit* are vital to any understanding of the early days of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the United Synagogue of America.<sup>69</sup> I look at other European developments, for example in France, which Phyllis Cohen Albert addressed in *The modernization of French Jewry* and Jay Berkovitz in *Rites and passages*, and more widely among the examples in Frankel and Zipperstein's collection *Assimilation and community*.

These works developed the required analytical tools to understand traditional leaders in modern times. Ellenson argues convincingly for the increased importance of persuasion over dictat or coercion as the primary method of upholding tradition; these scholars point out the vital necessity of flexibility within the tradition, allowing change when fundamental principles were not at stake, and they emphasise the distinction between a successful approach for the leader of a small but highly traditional community, in order to maintain his tight knit group at their high level of religious observance, and the approach suitable for the leader of a larger but less committed community who is seeking to maintain certain minimum standards of Jewish life, to keep his followers within the traditional Jewish world, albeit not at the highest level.<sup>70</sup> Before I apply these insights to Britain, I wish to lay out the sources used and the methodologies employed in this study.

This book uses a variety of methods. The accounts in the major works which touch upon Britain's Chief Rabbis and Anglo-Jewish religious

history that I have just reviewed will be tested against the evidence to be found in primary sources. These sources come in three forms. First, a great deal of information was extracted from the *Jewish Chronicle*, the leading newspaper of Anglo-Jewry in this period. Archival material was consulted, particularly in the London Metropolitan Archives of the Chief Rabbinate, the United Synagogue and the Court of the Chief Rabbi (London Beth Din) but also in the Anglo-Jewish Archives at Southampton University, where Hertz's and H.M. Lazarus' private papers are kept, the Adler and other papers in the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, in the collections of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, which include Samuel Hillman's papers, and the London School of Jewish Studies. Finally, use was made of oral testimonies from individuals with first-hand knowledge. As a source, the *Jewish Chronicle* is as reliable, and as unreliable, as any other newspaper. Historically, it often had axes to grind, but a lot of its reports were very dry. Synagogue meetings were often reported in great detail with little or no comment. Of course, as Carr argues, the selection of details to report is in itself a form of distortion, but that is a caveat about the source rather than a dismissal of its usefulness and reliability.<sup>71</sup> Even more usefully the *Jewish Chronicle* often printed, in full, United Synagogue reports, Chief Rabbis' sermons and lectures and, of course, letters to the editor, which tell us exactly what was proposed, preached and debated in public, and what it was that proponents for a particular case wanted others to believe.

The archives consulted contain letters to and from the religious and lay leaders of the United Synagogue and others, minutes of meetings, rabbinical rulings and so forth. We would not today ascribe the same reliability to these sources as Elton or Namier might have done, but they do give an important insight into the private feelings of the leading participants and the nature of the debates between them.<sup>72</sup> We do not have to believe every word they said or wrote to find the fact that they said or wrote it useful.<sup>73</sup> They have been relatively neglected until now and it has been possible to extract important evidence for the first time to establish a new understanding.

Finally, we come to the last source, oral testimony. An attempt was made to speak to as many people with first-hand knowledge as possible, for example the former United Synagogue ministers Isaac Levy and Leslie Hardman, the son of Yehezkel Abramsky, Chimen, and the former Executive Director of the Chief Rabbi's Office, Alan Greenbat. Although oral history is now recognised as a valid source, it remains difficult to work with. Memory is an individual's imaginative recreation of his or her past, and it can sometimes be very imaginative indeed.

Furthermore, it fades and changes over time. However, initial concern about the 'truthfulness' of oral testimony has been replaced by a realisation that what people believed happened can be as important, in shaping their views and actions, as what actually happened. My interviewees' opinions have helped shape the relationship between the Anglo-Jewish community and its history.

This study tries to avoid the terms 'orthodox', 'conservative', 'reform', 'right' and 'left' to describe religious positions. Instead the terms 'traditional' and 'radical' will be employed, supported by specifying detail. The terms 'orthodox', 'reform' and so forth contain no fixed meaning. They have been used at different times by different people to mean different things. For example, Robert Waley Cohen described Rabbi J.J. Weinberg in 1934 as 'ultra-orthodox' a term that would not be applied to him today.<sup>74</sup> The same Robert Waley Cohen protested that his brand of orthodoxy was being overtaken by ultra-orthodoxy because of pressure to close shops at the time when the Sabbath began on a Friday afternoon, however early, rather than waiting for six o'clock.<sup>75</sup> It is unlikely that anyone today would claim that orthodoxy was compatible with keeping businesses open into the hours of darkness on a Friday.

Morris Joseph described the Principal of Jews' College, Michael Friedlander, in 1902 as 'conservative' whereas Meirovitch himself calls Friedlander 'a strict traditionalist'.<sup>76</sup> 'Positive historical' was used by Frankel to describe his ideology, but Hertz talks of the 'positive historical Judaism of our fathers' in a reference to what we would now call orthodoxy.<sup>77</sup> Hertz elsewhere described S.R. Hirsch as 'the most ardent defender of Traditional Judaism in the nineteenth century' although we would hardly associate Hirsch with the rather tepid implications that the term 'traditional' carries today.<sup>78</sup> Hertz himself used the terms 'orthodox,' 'conservative,' 'traditional,' 'historical' and 'positive historical' interchangeably.<sup>79</sup> We have to recognise what Oswald John Simon in 1915 called the 'folly of religious labels' and avoid using the terms employed in the past to define contemporary theological positions. We will leave them well alone and define what is meant when necessary, rather than relying on fundamentally unreliable shorthand. One function of the typology we will now introduce will be to provide alternative shorthand, which will be used in preference to the more conventional labels.

## Notes

1 M. Persoff, *Immanuel Jakobovits: a prophet in Israel* (London 2002), 13.

2 'Tradition' is, of course, something that is constantly changing and

developing, as I discuss later. In this context 'less traditional' means estranged from the consensus among those who consider themselves, at the time, to be traditional.

- 3 G. Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford 1992), 147; H. Meirovich, *A vindication of Judaism* (New York 1998), 13–15.
- 4 The term 'modernity' is used in very different ways across different academic disciplines, including history, cultural studies, literary theory and sociology. In this study the term is used to denote its traditional meaning in the field of Jewish history: the period after the Enlightenment (and its Jewish aspect, the *Haskalah*) and Jewish Emancipation.
- 5 D. Taylor, *British Chief Rabbis, 1664–2006* (London 2007), 239, 258, 311, 345, 370, 407.
- 6 C. Roth, 'Chief Rabbis', in Jung, *Jewish leaders* (Jerusalem 1953).
- 7 Taylor, *British Chief Rabbis*.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 258, 331, 368.
- 9 M. Persoff, *Faith against reason: religious reform and the British Chief Rabbinate, 1840–1990* (London 2008).
- 10 T.M. Endelman, 'Introduction' in Persoff, *Faith against reason*, xxxi.
- 11 Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*.
- 12 I. Endelman, *Jews of Britain* (Berkeley 2000).
- 13 Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 146.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 108–109.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*, 147, 146.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 148; G. Alderman, 'Power, authority and status in British Jewry: the Chief Rabbinate and shechita' in Alderman and Holmes (ed) *Outsiders and outcasts: essays in honour of William J. Fishman* (London 1993), 17.
- 19 Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 147.
- 20 Alderman, 'The Chief Rabbinate and shechita' 17.
- 21 Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 355, 359.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 359.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 361.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 364.
- 25 Compare *Ibid.*, 364 and Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 251.
- 26 Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 120.
- 27 D.B. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment* (Princeton 2000), 5.
- 28 Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 250.
- 29 Persoff, *Faith and reason*, 236, 247.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 252.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 253.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 T. Endelman, 'Practices of a low anthropological level: a *shehitah* con-

- trovery of the 1950s' in Kershner (ed) *Food in the migrant experience* (Aldershot 2002), 79.
- 35 W.D. Rubinstein, *Jews in the English-speaking world* (London 1996), 411, 414.
- 36 Endelman, 'A *shehitah* controversy of the 1950s', 88, 89.
- 37 Persoff, *Faith against reason*, 118.
- 38 V.D. Lipman, *History of the Jews in Britain* (Leicester 1990), 92.
- 39 I. Finstein, *Anglo-Jewry in changing times* (London 1999), 247.
- 40 Persoff, *Faith and reason*, 381.
- 41 B. Homa, *A fortress in Anglo-Jewry* (London 1953); J. Jung, *Champions of orthodoxy* (London 1974).
- 42 D. Englander, 'Anglicized not Anglican', 235–273.
- 43 M. Freud Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913* (London 2006), 52, 53, 64.
- 44 Ibid., 90.
- 45 Ibid., 68, 93.
- 46 Ibid., 90, 98, 100.
- 47 Ibid., 106, 109, 120.
- 48 Ibid., 108.
- 49 Ibid., 122.
- 50 Ibid., 116, 113.
- 51 Ibid., 116.
- 52 Ibid., 147, 150.
- 53 Ibid., 137, 138, 145, 135.
- 54 Ibid., 159.
- 55 Meirovich, *Vindication*, 13.
- 56 Ibid., 8.
- 57 Ibid., 10.
- 58 Ibid., 15.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid., 14–18.
- 61 A. Newman, *Chief Rabbi Dr. Joseph H. Hertz, C.H.* (London 1973), 1–2.
- 62 Ibid., 20.
- 63 P. Shatzkes, *Holocaust and rescue* (London 2004), 224.
- 64 S.C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew prayer* (Cambridge 1999), 285.
- 65 N. Cohen 'Trends in Anglo-Jewish religious life' in Gould and Esh (ed) *Trends in Jewish life* (London 1964), 46.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 N. Cohen, 'The religious crisis in Anglo-Jewry' *Tradition* 8:2 (Summer 1966), 46.
- 68 I. Jakobovits, 'An analysis of secular versus religious trends in Anglo-Jewry' in Lipman and Lipman (ed) *Jewish Life in Britain* (London 1977).
- 69 D. Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer* (Tuscaloosa 1990), D. Ellenson, *After Emancipation* (Cincinnati 2004), M. Breuer, *Modernity within tradition* (New York 1992), M.A. Meyer, *Judaism within modernity* (Detroit

2001), M.B. Shapiro, *Between the yeshiva world and modern orthodoxy: the life and times of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg* (Oxford 1999), M. Davis, *Conservative Judaism* (Philadelphia 1963), J. Wertheimer, *Tradition renewed* (New York 1997), R.E. Fierstein, *A different spirit* (New York 1986), P. Cohen Albert, *The modernization of French Jewry* (Hanover, New Hampshire 1977), J.M. Berkovitz, *Rites and passages* (Philadelphia 2004), J. Frankel and S.J. Zipperstein (ed), *Assimilation and community* (Cambridge 1992).

70 Ellenson, *Hildesheimer*, 63–72.

71 E.H. Carr, *What is history?* (London 1961, 2nd edn 1987), 7ff.

72 G.R. Elton, *The practice of history* (Sydney 1967), *passim*; see L.B. Namier, *The structure of politics at the accession of George III* (London 1927) for insight into Namier's method and attitude to sources, particularly private letters and diaries.

73 Many of the points made either explicitly or implicitly in the works of Carr, Elton, Namier and others have been repeated more recently, for example by R. Evans in his *In defence of history* (London 2001) and J. Tosh in *The pursuit of history* (London 1991). Nevertheless, these earlier works remain the best expressions of the fundamental issues connected with the use of sources in the study of history.

74 Shapiro, *Weinberg*, 134.

75 Homa, *Fortress*, 14–15.

76 M. Joseph, *Judaism as life and creed* (London 1903), 27; Meirovitch, *Vindication*, 162.

77 J.H. Hertz, *Early and late* (Hindhead, Surrey 1943), 162.

78 J.H. Hertz, *Affirmations of Judaism* (Oxford 1927), 66.

79 For examples see Hertz, *Affirmations*, 47, 57, 64, 129, J.H. Hertz, *Sermons, addresses and studies* (London 1938), I 289, and Hertz, *Early and late*, 227.