

THE COMMUNAL GADFLY

AN ANTHOLOGY

Geoffrey Alderman

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"In this volume I present an anthology chosen, by me, from the weekly opinion column that I have been writing since March 2002 for the London-based Jewish Chronicle."--Pref.

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For Michael Gross

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PREFACE

In this volume I present an anthology chosen, by me, from the weekly opinion column that I have been writing since March 2002 for the London-based *Jewish Chronicle*.

The *Jewish Chronicle* is the oldest continuously circulating Jewish newspaper in the world. Founded in 1841, it inevitably attracted rival newssheets, which in time were either acquired by it or forced out of business. Today it has a number of imitators, but it is still rightly regarded as *the* Anglo-Jewish newspaper of record. To be invited to write for it is an accolade. To be invited to contribute a weekly column is a rare privilege.

In the spring of 2002 this privilege fell upon my shoulders.

The column which I inherited – the weekly *Comment* at the top of the page, opposite the leaders and letters – has a long and distinguished history. In the nineteenth century the paper carried a column written by “Nemo” – actually the Reverend A. L. Green of the Central Synagogue, London – the contents of which were characterised by “sly hits at the foibles” of communal leaders; its style was “racy but not undignified.”¹ In the early twentieth century this tradition – an informed and purposeful irreverence – was maintained by A. L. Greens’ nephew, A. A. Green (minister of the Hampstead Synagogue), an eccentric but conscientious preacher and pastoral worker who wrote under the pseudonym “Tatler.” This column was in turn superseded by another, from the hand of “Mentor,” the pen-name of Leopold Greenberg.

Greenberg was an experienced journalist, who had been a close personal friend of Theodor Herzl. In 1907 he purchased the *Chronicle* and, while putting the newspaper at the service of Zionism, was not afraid of attacking the ‘establishment’ on a wide range of issues, domestic and foreign, using for this purpose not only his leading articles but also his “Mentor” column.² On Greenberg’s death (1931) the editorship went (after a short interlude) to his son, Ivan, a devotee of the militant Zionist party *Herut*, founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky and directed subsequently by Menachem Begin.

A controlling interest in the paper was then held by David Kessler, a Zionist but a moderate one. In the last, bloody years of the Palestine Mandate relations between Kessler and Ivan Greenberg deteriorated. Ivan Greenberg was fired³, and the editor-

1. [C. Roth], *The Jewish Chronicle 1841-1941* (London, 1949), 85

2. *Ibid*, 136-7.

3. D. Cesarani, *The Jewish Chronicle 1841 – 1991* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 190-1.

ship went instead to an irascible Mancunian, John Shaftesley, a printer by trade, whose approach to his editorial duties was unashamedly formulaic. Though not afraid, on occasion, to question received wisdom, Shaftesley took care not to rock too many boats. Notoriously, during the 1956 Suez crisis, he went out of his way to defend Jewish Labour MPs who meekly followed the Labour Party line in condemning Israel's military action against Egypt.

In 1958 Shaftesley was "kicked upstairs" – he was made an executive director and sent back to Manchester to take charge of the *Jewish Gazette* (which the *Chronicle* owned). He was succeeded by a young lawyer, William Frankel. Under Frankel's editorship (1958 – 77) the *Chronicle* underwent two revolutions simultaneously. It was typographically redesigned. And its content was refocused onto the tensions and tribulations experienced by an Anglo-Jewish community that was fast becoming polarised, pluralised and dysfunctional – at times hilariously so.

To assist him in this task, Frankel recruited a dynamic team of experienced anti-establishment journalists, chief amongst whom was Chaim Bermant, born in Latvia, educated in the UK, and a master wordsmith. At first Bermant was but one of a number of skilled writers who contributed to the *Chronicle's* "Personal Opinion" column under the collective pseudonym "Ben Azai."⁴ In time other contributors fell away. Bermant was given his own column – "On The Other Hand" – which he wrote under his own name. The column appeared, week after week, until Bermant's untimely death in January 1998.

It is difficult to over-estimate Chaim Bermant's contribution both to the newspaper and to Anglo-Jewish journalism. As he himself wrote in 1994, whilst he did not "dabble in outrage" for its own sake, he hated "complacency and humbug."⁵ There was none in his column. And there were certainly no sacred cows.

Following Bermant's death the column was written by a number of prominent media personalities and intellectuals, including Adam Raphael, John Diamond and Norman Lebrecht. In February 2002 I was asked to take it over. My first contribution appeared in the *Chronicle* on 1 March that year.

In writing the column I have been given a completely free hand, both as to subject-matter and as to content. The subject-matter has generally been dictated by events that were of current concern at the time of writing. As to content, I have written to my strengths and within my limitations. The wit of Chaim Bermant was unique. I cannot emulate it and I have not attempted to. I have tried to be funny when occasion has seemed to me to warrant the deployment of a certain humour, which can be a valuable didactic tool and a powerful medium of communication. I have on occasion employed sarcasm and irony. But I have always tried to be scrupulously accurate as to facts, and to locate my comments within that groundwork. Above all, I have presented a point of view that is unashamedly mine.

In choosing pieces for the present anthology I have deliberately avoided items

4. Cesarani, *op.cit.*, 238; G. Alderman, obituary of William Frankel, *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 April 2008.

5. 'Personal Opinion,' in C. Bermant, *On The Other Hand* (London, 2000), 4-5

that might be thought excessively parochial, selecting instead columns linked to themes that will, I hope, be of interest to a wider audience. Within the thematic chapters the columns selected are not always in strict chronological order; and the themes themselves should by no means be thought of as watertight compartments. But each chapter begins with an introduction, in which I describe the context and add some broader explanation or guidance where this has seemed necessary. The columns themselves are reproduced just as they appeared; very occasionally I have added a footnote by way of textual gloss.

I did not become the *JC*'s regular opinion columnist without having previously acquired a reputation – beyond British Jewry as well as within it – as something of a rebel and as someone who was inherently suspicious of toeing the communal line. In an article about me in its issue of 13 February 1987 the *JC* referred to me as “The Communal Gadfly.” It is a title that I have worn with immense pride and satisfaction.

The columns that appear in this collection have been written under the auspices of three editors: Ned Temko until 2005; Jeff Barak 2005-6; and, latterly, David Rowan. To each of them, and their editorial teams, I owe a debt of gratitude, and I must also record my thanks to the *Jewish Chronicle* itself for permission to the columns here.

On another page I am delighted to be able to record my thanks to a great Jewish philanthropist, who has carried the banner of communal integrity high when so many others have let it slip from their grasp.

Geoffrey Alderman

I THE BOARD OF DEPUTIES OF BRITISH JEWS and THE JEWISH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

The history of the Board (formerly London Committee) of Deputies of British Jews typifies in a number of respect the strengths and weaknesses of the manner in which British Jews have organised themselves ever since the so-called 'Readmission,' under Oliver Cromwell, in 1656.

The 'Readmission' was not a readmission at all.¹ The Jews were expelled from England by royal decree in 1290. Ostensibly, the Readmission was effected by the decision of Cromwell's council of state (June 25 1656) to permit Jews to meet in London for private worship. But Marranos – crypto-Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition – had been living in England since at least 1536. During the reign of James I an outraged Spanish ambassador reported back to Madrid that Jews were to be found living and worshipping together in Bristol, and that they even had the audacity to bake unleavened bread (matzo) for the Passover festival.

Much is often made of the initiative of the Amsterdam rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, who in 1651 petitioned Cromwell to allow Jews to re-enter England. This petition unleashed five years of furious debate among the Puritan divines and the army that ran the country during the interregnum. Cromwell seems to have favoured granting the petition. But religious opposition to the petition was extremely strong. In the event it was not Menasseh's petition that was granted in 1656, but that of seven Marranos already living in London. Furious with Menasseh for having poked his unwelcome nose into their business, they argued simply for the right of private worship for Jews already settled here, and for permission to purchase land for a cemetery outside city limits. The last thing they wanted was the right of Jews to enter the country as they pleased. And they certainly did not want the unwelcome publicity to which Menasseh's melodramatic initiative had given rise.

In an important sense the events of the 1650s set the tone for Jewish settlement in Great Britain ever since, and in an equally important sense they defined its terms. Chief among these is the feeling, deeply embedded amongst British Jews, that they are – still – outsiders here on sufferance, and that they must keep their heads well down, maintain a low profile, and not to make a fuss. Image is everything.

In my *JC* column of 23 March 2007 I traced how these founding characteristics had affected, and had been reflected in, the history of the Board of Deputies. Three hundred years ago the elders of the Bevis Marks synagogue actually fined members whose conduct outside the synagogue was deemed to bring Anglo-Jewry into disrepute. The heroic struggle of Lionel de Rothschild to be able to sit in the Commons as a professing Jew was not widely supported in the community: most Jews in the 1840s and 1850s had no interest whatever in "political emancipation," and were terrified lest the antics of Jewish MPs give British Jewry a bad name. The communal outrage that greeted the publication in 1888 of Amy Levy's brilliant novel *Reuben Sachs*, portraying the decadent materialism of the Jewish middle-classes in late Victorian London, drove her to suicide.

1. This and the following four paragraphs are based on my article in *The Guardian*, 31 December 2005, looking forward to the celebrations marking the 350th anniversary of the 'Resettlement.'

The Jewish Board of Deputies did not sanction a public demonstration against Nazism until 1938. Indeed the Anglo-Jewish record of Holocaust rescue is a miserable testament to inaction that sprang from fear and self-interest. The exceptional rescue efforts of Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld (chief rabbi Hertz's son-in-law) earned him only a public rebuke (1943) from the then president of the deputies, professor Selig Brodetsky.

In 2003 a proposal to display in this country the burnt carcass of an Israeli bus that had been attacked by Palestinian terrorists was vetoed by the communal grandees on the grounds that such tastelessness would offend non-Jews and bring the community unwelcome publicity that it could well do without.

The Board of Deputies like to think of itself as the 'representative' body of British Jews. It is no such thing. In the very first of my regular *JC* columns (1 March 2002) I took the opportunity to remind my readers of this stark fact, and also of some recent instances of bungling ineptitude that have been the hallmark of the Board, certainly in the period post-1945. One of these – the attempted public auction of a notoriously anti-Semitic manuscript – caused uproar world-wide.² My column of 23 August 2002 dealt with another, well-publicised example of ineffective clumsiness, and on 24 October 2003 I addressed another myth propagated by the Board and its major ecclesiastical authority – the so-called 'Chief Rabbi' – that there can be and is in fact only one 'Jewish view' on any and every issue that comes before it and him. These themes were, as it turned out, deeply woven into the Board's clumsy attempt to articulate an Anglo-Jewish view on faith education (column of 17 March 2006).

In 1971 the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations walked out of the Board, a step it has never regretted.³ The non-orthodox congregations also find that the Board, dominated by religious 'centrists,' ill-suits their needs. And the wealthy plutocrats whose money oils the machinery of British Jewry certainly have no time to waste on the Board and its petty squabbles.

These factors led the then President of the Board, lawyer Henry Grunwald, to establish in October 2003 a 'Jewish Community Leadership Council,' which is not elected by anyone but which does in fact – primarily because of the money its self-selected members command – have a great deal of influence. In my *Purim* column of 25 March 2005 I reflected, somewhat sarcastically it is true, on the origins and work of this Council, and on the true significance of its establishment.

2. The episode is treated at length in G. Alderman & C. Holmes, 'The Burton Book,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* vol. 18, no. 1 (January 2008), 1 – 13.

3. The reasons that impelled the Union to take this step are examined in G. Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1998), 374-5.

Disband this body of (un)representatives

1 March 2002

I'm afraid I cannot work myself into a frenzy over the latest *faux pas* involving the Board of Deputies. Recently, you may recall, there was a leak to the press of an internal Board memo concerning the United Synagogue's Chief Rabbi, Dr Sacks, who had allegedly insinuated himself into the recent Holocaust Memorial Day event in Manchester. He had done this, it appears, without first obtaining the Board's permission, and the Board's President, former schoolmarm Jo Wagerman, was naturally more than a little put out.

There was another leak to the press of a protest from the self-same aforementioned Mrs Wagerman to the Home Office, which had decided not to front Home Secretary David Blunkett as the principal government 'guest' at this event.

All very annoying, no doubt. Mrs Wagerman must try harder to keep her official papers under lock and key. But important? I mean, of real significance for British Jews? Hardly.

Mrs. Wagerman's credibility as a serious defender of Jewish interests was lost when, without even consulting the Deputies, she embarked on the (fortunately) ill-fated auction of the Blood Libel penned by the 19th century orientalist and anti-Semite Sir Richard Burton. The manuscript failed to reach its reserve price. So Mrs Wagerman arranged a private sale, and used the proceeds towards the down-payment on office accommodation for the Board – namely a house formerly occupied by Isaac d'Israeli, who thought so little of his Jewishness that he arranged for the baptism of his children, including Benjamin Disraeli, the future politician and brothel owner. No one of any importance in government is going to take seriously an Anglo-Jewish organisation that comports itself thus.

As for Holocaust Memorial Day, show me the British Jewess or Jew who thinks this a good idea, and I will show you a fool. We Anglo-Jews do not need to be reminded of the Holocaust. Nor – in my experience – do our many Gentile friends in these islands. Our many Gentile enemies will only exploit the event in order to discomfort us. I have already heard calls for the event to include the self-inflicted Palestinian Arab 'holocaust' of 1948-49.

The legislation to give effect to Holocaust Memorial Day was introduced into Parliament by Labour MP Andrew Dismore. As MP for Hendon, which has the highest proportion of Jewish voters in any British parliamentary constituency, Mr Dismore can always be relied upon to know on which side his political bread is buttered. But Mr Dismore, if you *really*, honestly and truly want to befriend the Jewish world, your time would be better spent publicly pressuring the British government to join the Americans in vetoing anti-Israel resolutions at the UN. Or you might introduce a Bill

declaring *shechita* to be a humane form of slaughter – legislation which, if passed, would be of inestimable benefit to those who, like me, are engaged on a daily basis in the defence of the Jewish humane method of slaughtering food animals.

As for the Board of Deputies, I cannot think of an organisation more irrelevant to the contemporary well being of British Jews. I speak from bitter experience. During the 1980s, and at the express request of the late Moishe Lederman, I agreed to become a Deputy in the interest of the Federation of Synagogues. What is more, again at Moishe's request, I got myself elected to the Board's *Shechita* Committee (or, rather, Moishe arranged for my election, which I do realise is not quite the same thing).

Believe me, being on the Board, and on its *Shechita* Committee, were (to misquote the late Aneurin Bevan) "forms of torture unknown to the ancients." If anyone doubts this, I urge them to wait until I have transcribed and published the tape-recordings of the meetings of the *Shechita* Committee, where it became clear early on that the authority to deal with *shechita* defence had been privately ceded in its entirety to the then Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue, Immanuel Jakobovits.

It also became clear that neither the Board nor its *Shechita* Committee could really represent Anglo-Jewry, since the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations had left the Board in 1971. Most religious groupings within the British Jewish communities, in any case, did not recognise Rabbi Jakobovits as their religious spokesperson.

The Board is simply no longer competent – if it ever was – to deal with religious matters. It might deal with broad matters of communal defence, but the absence of the Union, and the antics of Mrs Wagerman, have clearly undermined any potential role which it might still wish to arrogate to itself in this respect.

Of course, those of us 'in the know' are fully conversant with these facts of Anglo-Jewish life. Most British Gentiles are not. I can quite understand why they turn to the Board whenever a 'Jewish' view is wanted. We need to make it clear to them that there is no such thing as a 'Jewish view' (even within the practising orthodox world), only Jewish views, and that the old adage 'two Jews, three opinions', is, for better or worse, literally true. As Political Director of the Campaign for the Protection of *Shechita* I have never had the slightest difficulty in meeting government ministers and civil servants to help put the Campaign's point of view. The imprimatur of the Board is not necessary, nor was it ever.

In the USA our Jewish brethren manage to cope very nicely without a Board of Deputies of American Jews. A council of presidents of major American Jewish organisations does meet to discuss matters of mutual interest. A similar body, of a dozen or so people, is – surely – all that British Jewry requires.

Uncharitable thoughts of hidden agendas

23 August 2002

The laws concerning charities are complex and forbidding. To encourage charitable giving, the state confers on charities, and on donors to charities, especially favourable tax treatment. Individuals and corporations can claim tax relief against charitable donations. The charities to which they give pay no tax on their income.

Because of their tax status, charities are subject to stringent but by no means unfair or over burdensome controls. Charities must be registered with the body that supervises them on behalf of the state – in England and Wales this is the Charity Commission. The commission must approve the constitution and objects of the charity. An annual return – largely of a financial nature – must be made to the commission, and be publicly available.

Over the years there has been a great deal of debate about what a charity actually is. Activities that in former times were regarded as charitable may no longer be so. At the moment there is much discussion about whether the “public” – i.e. private – schools should any longer enjoy charitable status. This matter will be openly debated and the government will no doubt bring forward proposals to deal with matters of concern.

Charities may therefore find that they can no longer do certain things because society has decided that these things are no longer charitable. When my late father first joined a burial society his annual subscription was treated as a charitable donation. Later this status was revoked, because the state decided that although providing for one’s burial might be an act of piety, it was not an act of charity. I seem to recall that he was less than overjoyed on receiving this news. But he accepted it as being in the public interest.

The Charity Commission enforces, on all our behalves, the rules and regulations that Parliament has authorised. The commission’s job is “to give the public confidence in the integrity of charity.” I am currently the chairman of a charity. I know how much my fellow trustees and I value the commission’s advice and assistance. But of course there is another side to the commission’s work, namely to “prevent mismanagement and abuse.” And this work too is carried out on your behalf and mine, because you and I subsidise all charities through the taxes they and their benefactors do not pay.

Last month the director-general of the Board of Deputies of British Jews sent out one of the most stupid and politically inept communications ever to be published with the Board’s imprimatur. In a letter and enclosure — which I have seen — Neville Nagler more or less suggested that, in investigating Jewish charities, the Charity Commission might be pursuing a hidden agenda. Not to put too fine a point on it, Mr

Nagler implied – I put it no higher – that the commission had some special animus against Jewish charities, and in order to better inform himself, he asked recipients of his letter to complete and return to him a questionnaire which, had it been drafted by one of my first-year political science students, I would have failed outright.

Mr Nagler's letter was politically inept on several grounds. Firstly, the letter was marked "confidential" – thereby ensuring that it would enjoy a wide circulation. Secondly, if the director-general of the Board of Deputies has genuine concerns about alleged anti-Jewish prejudice within the Charity Commission, the very last thing he should have done was to have committed these to paper, over his signature. Not – that is – without a great deal of very solid evidence, of which at the moment there is apparently none.

Mr Nagler's letter was stupid, because those of us who have investigated Jewish charities know that many of them are in a right mess. A dozen years ago, in the course of my academic work, I visited the Charity Commission to inspect the annual accounts and returns of a large number of Jewish charities. In many cases there were simply no accounts to be found. The Charity Commission had itself acted charitably – perhaps too charitably – in not chasing this missing paperwork and calling the trustees to account for their deeds and misdeeds.

Sadly, this mess has not yet been cleared up. If you don't believe me, you can check on the Internet via www.charity-commission.gov.uk of – say – the Beth Jacob Grammar School for Girls, or the Jewish Secondary Schools Movement, whose accounts for 2000-2001 are both marked "overdue." Or Jews' College, whose accounts for 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 are likewise marked "overdue."

The Charity Commission has at last begun to flex its muscles, and is asking pointed and highly relevant questions – of Jewish and non-Jewish charities – not only about missing paperwork but also about the conduct of trustees. United Synagogue president Peter Sheldon may complain that his organisation is "under siege" from the commission. But if he and his colleagues have not acted inappropriately, what have they to fear?

Those who volunteer to manage the affairs of charities must ensure that the tax-free assets in their care are administered in a manner consistent with the law of the land and the objects of the charity in question. Nobody is forced to become a trustee. Trustees must think very carefully before they give away the assets of the trust, or use them for purposes that might be at variance with its deed of foundation. If in doubt, don't – for God's sake – ask a rabbi. Ask the Charity Commission.

Only one Jewish View? You must be joking

24 October 2003

Last month the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, addressed the Board of Deputies of British Jews. In that address, as the *JC* reported at the time and as my fellow columnist, Anne Karpf, reminded us two weeks ago, Dr Sacks made an impassioned plea.

He urged us all to recognise the primacy of the Deputies in the affairs of British Jewry and the duty incumbent upon all right-thinking British Jews to take shelter – whether they liked it or not – under its benevolent wing.

The Deputies, Dr Sacks declared, "must be clearly and categorically recognised as the one point, the sole point, that defends the interests of the Anglo-Jewish community." As if to underline the awesome if not actually prophetic truth of this pronouncement Dr Sacks asked his audience to imagine a situation he went out of his way to insist was "purely hypothetical".

Imagine, he said, that two or more Jewish groups with differing views on a particular issue lobby a government minister "highly sympathetic to the Jewish community". "What is she supposed to do?", the Chief Rabbi asked: "She now knows that if she helps this group she will upset that group. And if she helps that group she is going to offend this group ... We will have asked that person to do the impossible. We will have thrust her into the most invidious situation than any politician can be placed [in]."

"This is what happens", Dr Sacks solemnly admonished, "if the Board is not seen as the sole representative of the Anglo-Jewish community to governments." And he warned "Don't weaken the Board by criticising it".

Coming from the mouth of someone who has written a book (or more accurately two variants of the same book) entitled *The Dignity of Difference* this plea struck me as more than a little specious. Not to put too fine a point on it, the plea struck me as humbug from beginning to end, reflecting ignorance of how British government actually works as well as ignorance of the history of the Deputies – or perhaps a convenient unwillingness to confront that history.

To begin with, government ministers are presented on a daily basis with the "purely hypothetical" scenario Dr Sacks so vividly imagined. I am able to say this with some degree of certainty as I happen to be the author of a learned monograph on pressure groups and the governmental process in Britain.

One might argue that this is actually what politics is all about – choosing between the competing claims of groups in society that have differing views on the same issue. That is in part what we pay politicians to do – to choose amongst these claims and to

take the difficult decisions.

This is the bread-and-butter stuff of government.

Indeed, the civil servants who advise ministers research each and every group that ministers might meet. They actually produce highly informative lists of these groups, indicating which groups are, in their professional judgement, always worthy of a hearing, which should sometimes be given a hearing, and which can be safely but politely ignored.

So if – and I too am speaking purely hypothetically – a government minister agrees to see two Jewish groups, we can be sure that the minister has been advised professionally, by the minister's professional advisers, that both groups are worthy of being given a hearing.

And that being the case, who is Dr Sacks, or any one else for that matter, to say that either group is unworthy of a hearing, or should never have had the audacity to ask for a hearing in the first place?

Let's stop beating about the bush. We all know that over the centuries the Deputies have repeatedly tried to insist that they and they alone have the right to be heard by government. And we all know that over the centuries successive governments of very different political persuasions have brushed aside this self-serving posturing.

In 1845 Moses Montefiore (the strictly orthodox President of the Deputies) and Isaac Lyon Goldsmid (a founder of the West London Reform Synagogue) led rival deputations to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, on the issue of political emancipation.

In 1916-17 Zionists, anti-Zionists and non-Zionists all lobbied Whitehall over the future of Jewish settlement in Palestine.

In 1943 the Deputies did succeed in sabotaging an attempt by Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld (Chief Rabbi Hertz's son-in-law) to persuade the House of Commons to pass a motion calling on Dominion governments to shelter Holocaust refugees.

The then President of the Deputies, Selig Brodetsky, subsequently wrote to the *JC* (5 February 1943) to defend what the Deputies had done. He explained that any challenge from within British Jewry to the claim of the Deputies to have an exclusive right of audience with the British government had to be resisted, "however well-intentioned."

On 2 March 1988 I happened to be interviewing the then President of the Deputies, Dr Lionel Kopelowitz. "There's got to be a Jewish view at the end of the day", he thundered, "there can't be two Jewish views or three Jewish views."

I am bound to ask now, as I asked then, why not. And I am bound to conclude that an insistence of the Board of Deputies that it and it alone has the right to be heard is an unmitigated *chutzpah*.

Joint statement that's not so joint

17 March 2006

On February 22, a most bizarre “joint statement” was issued by the Department for Education and Skills and nine individuals who were said to represent the leading religious communities in the United Kingdom.

At the top of this list – presumably because “Catholic” comes before “Church of England” – was Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, head of the Roman Catholic Church in England. Then came the Bishop of Portsmouth on behalf of the Anglican Church. Further down the list were representatives of the Buddhists, the Free Churches, the UK Hindu Council, the Methodists, and the Network of Sikh Organisations. Also on the list was the name of Sir Iqbal Sacranie, of the Muslim Council of Britain, to which I shall return in due course.

But the name that really caught my eye was that of Mr Jon Benjamin, representing the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

In October 2004, the DfES published the first-ever National Framework for Religious Education. That framework is non-statutory. Nonetheless, behind the scenes the government has been working hard to get the leaders of the major faith groups in the UK to sign up to one of its central themes, namely that, in all taxpayer-funded faith schools, pupils should learn about other religions. And so, after months of negotiation, the joint statement was launched, binding its signatories to the view that “schools with a religious designation should teach not only their own faith but also an awareness of the tenets of other faiths.”

On the face of it, no one could possibly object to these carefully crafted words. It is surely right for pupils in publicly assisted faith schools (I am thinking primarily of the 30 state-maintained Jewish schools) to be made aware of the fact that Britain is not a Jewish state and that the majority of British people, if they profess any religion at all, profess religions other than Judaism in its various branches.

Many, if not most, of you reading this column might also agree that pupils should know something – in superficial outline that falls deliberately short of anything remotely resembling systematic theology – about these other religions.

But there are several deeply troubling aspects to this otherwise innocuous initiative. To begin with, the Board of Deputies is not a religious body. Nor does it represent the totality of British Jewry. Its writ does not run in Gateshead, or in parts of Jewish Barnet, Jewish Hackney, and Jewish Manchester. And even where its writ does run, it is obliged to seek the guidance of its ecclesiastical authorities, the spiritual head of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews (Rabbi Dr Abraham Levy) and the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations, Rabbi Professor Sir Jonathan Sacks. It is also obliged to consult the religious heads of congregations not recognising the authority of either

of these two gentlemen.

Well, for starters, I can tell you that Dr Levy was never asked for his views on the matter of the joint statement. Nor was the religious head of my congregation (the Federation of Synagogues), Dayan Y. Y. Lichtenstein, ever consulted about it.

This is a pity, not least because Dayan Lichtenstein has some interesting views, strictly grounded, as you might expect, in *halachah*, on the extent to which Jewish children can be taught about other religions. He believes, for instance, that they can be taught something about the beliefs of Islam, but not about Christianity, which in his view falls within *avodah zarah* – idol worship.

And I have to ask what Mr Benjamin's signature was doing on the joint statement. Why didn't the statement contain the name of Sir Jonathan Sacks (assuming he agreed with its contents)? What about the religious heads of the Reform movement, the Liberals and the Masorti? Were they consulted? And, if so, why didn't their names appear?

I turn now to a name that did appear, that of Iqbal Sacranie, secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain. Just like the Board of Deputies, the MCB is not a religious organisation. Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor may be able, in an ecclesiastical sense, to speak for and on behalf of all the Roman Catholics in the UK. Sir Iqbal cannot speak, in an ecclesiastical sense, for British Muslims, let alone bind them to any particular religious imperative.

Had the joint statement included the authorised signatories of, say, the Lancashire or Bradford Council of Mosques, or the Islamic Sharia Council of the UK, I might have been inclined to take it seriously. As it is, it is not worth the paper it is printed on.

The Board, a true history

23 March 2007

The Board of Deputies is commissioning a new history of itself as part of the celebrations it intends to hold in three years' time to mark the 250th anniversary of its foundation. For those of you who cannot wait that long, I have decided to offer now a "reduced" version of this history. So, if you're sitting uncomfortably, I'll begin.

1760: The London Committee of Deputies of British Jews was established following the embarrassment of two separate loyal addresses to King George III – one from the Sephardim and the other from the Ashkenazim.

1802-1828: The Committee had the good sense to meet infrequently. There was a meeting in 1812, followed by one in 1817 and others in 1820 and 1828.

1830-1858: The Committee played no part of any importance in the struggle for the political emancipation of the Jews. The pace of this struggle was set by the Reform Jew Isaac Lyon Goldsmid (who in 1845 led a rival deputation to Prime Minister Robert Peel), and the nominally Orthodox Ashkenazim Lionel de Rothschild and Sir David Salomons. In 1851, Salomons became the first professing Jew to sit in the House of Commons. The then president of the Deputies, Sir Moses Montefiore, made it clear that he was more interested in keeping Reformers out of the Deputies than in furthering the civil liberties of British Jews.

1886: Following Montefiore's death the previous year, the first Reformers (Sir Julian Goldsmid and Sir Phillip Magnus) entered the Deputies.

1881-1913: The Committee was reluctant to take any public stand against the persecution of Jews in Russia – for instance at the time of the Kishineff pogrom in 1903. It refused to condemn the principle of the legislation that became the Aliens Act (1905), designed to keep poor Jewish migrants out of the British Isles. The synagogues that these migrants established were denied representation on the Committee (a policy not abandoned until 1919).

1913: The Committee changed its name to Board.

1914-18: The Board refused to take up cases of Jewish conscientious objectors during the Great War. In 1917, the Board's president, David Alexander, signed an infamous anti-Zionist letter to *The Times*.

1918-39: The Board accepted the view that Jews were a major cause of antisemitism. In 1920, the Board acquiesced to a new London County Council policy discriminating against aliens who wished to teach in LCC schools. In 1923, the Board declined to conduct a campaign against new housing regulations promulgated by the LCC, the intention and effect of which was to discriminate against foreign-born Jews in the allocation of units on LCC housing estates. Under the leadership of the barrister Neville Laski (president, 1933-40), the Board established a Defence Committee, the major purpose of which was to deal with what the Committee itself was pleased to call “the internal causes of antisemitism”. “Not a day goes by,” the Defence Committee’s chairman wrote in November 1938, “without antisemitism being created by Jews themselves.” Up and down the land the Board established “Vigilance Committees” to investigate complaints against Jewish landlords, Jewish traders, Jewish employers and Jewish refugees.

The Board and Nazism: Following Hitler’s accession to power in 1933 and the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws (1935), the Board refused to endorse an economic boycott of Nazi Germany and opposed any public demonstration of opposition to Nazism. This policy was only abandoned following the Kristallnacht pogroms, in late 1938. The Board enthusiastically supported the policy of successive British governments in making certain that as few refugees from Nazism as possible were able to enter the UK. In 1940, the Board bribed the Yiddish newspaper *Di Tsait* to ensure that it ceased criticising Board policy. In 1943, the Board deliberately sabotaged the efforts of Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld to mobilise parliamentary support for his efforts to rescue Jews from Nazi-controlled Europe.

Post-War — fighting for the Rights of Jews Worldwide: In 1956, the Board supported its president, Labour MP Barnett Janner, who declined to endorse the Israeli invasion of the Sinai peninsula. In 1976, the Board refused an offer from the government to specifically include mention of Jews in the Race Relations Act. Between 1987 and 1990, the Board declined to oppose government policy that would have brought *shechita* to an end in this country. And we might note that throughout this period, the burden of opposing Soviet persecution of Jews was borne by groups outside the Board rather than by the Board itself.

Overall Conclusion: Could have done better, eh?

A seasonal game of follow my leader

25 March 2005

The Jewish Community Leadership Council was established in October 2003 on the initiative of Board of Deputies president, Henry Grunwald. An explanatory note circulated at the time said its work would involve “strengthening the voice of British Jewry in the wider society and setting internal priorities for the community.” Founder members of the council included the United Synagogue, the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, the United Jewish Israel Appeal, Jewish Care, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews’ Congregation, the Union of Jewish Students, the Community Security Trust and the Manchester Jewish Representative Council. Some very influential people were appointed in a personal capacity, to wit: Lords Greville Janner, Michael Levy and David Young; Dames Ruth Deech and Ruth Robins, and Sirs Ronald Cohen and Trevor Chinn.

The council suffered an early setback when plain Mr Michael Howard, a member of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, became leader of the Tory party. It was hurriedly deemed prudent to invite the Liberal Jewish movement to join the council to prevent a *broiges* from breaking out. Liberal Judaism chairman David Pick commented: “We’re pleased to have been invited to join. We feel it’s our rightful place as a significant section of British Jewry.” (Well said, David).

More recently, its membership leapt to 20 when leaders of three other communal organisations, Gail Seal (JNF), Michael Teacher (Norwood) and Nigel Layton (World Jewish Relief) were invited on board. “The JCLC is an illustrious body and I’m thrilled they consider the JNF important enough to join,” declared Mrs Seal. (Well said, Gail).

But what does the JCLC (now simply the JLC) actually do? Well, now we can find out because, in a new spirit of openness and accountability, the council has announced it is making publicly available the minutes of all its meetings. It is my privilege to present a selection of these, chosen by me at random from the voluminous documentation now (as I say) fully available for public scrutiny.

Founding Meeting, October 2003

The Chair explained that he had called the meeting as he was finding great difficulty in stamping his authority on Anglo-Jewry, and being recognised by Downing Street as its most important lay leader, merely by being head of its “fully representative” body. While it was of course true (and went without saying) that the Board of Deputies was – as its website proclaims – “fully representative,” it had occurred to him that it might not, in fact, be “fully representative” enough.

It was all very well the Board being “fully representative” but there were degrees of representativeness – were there not? (Shouts of “hear, hear!” from sundry participants.) Why, some of the most important and influential people in Anglo-Jewry would not touch the Board with a barge-pole. (Shouts of “hear, hear!” from sundry participants.)

He had therefore decided to strengthen the “fully representative” character of the Board by creating an entirely separate body, composed in the main of communal marchers who could not be expected to lower themselves by what he believed was termed “running for office” but whose wealth and influence fully entitled them to believe that they could order the affairs of Anglo-Jewry whether Anglo-Jews liked it or not. (Shouts of “hear hear!” from sundry participants.)

Emergency Meeting, December 2003

The Chair explained that he had called the meeting following confirmation of rumours that Mr Michael Howard had been elected Conservative Party Leader. Mr Howard was a member of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue. Although (the Chair continued) there was not a chance in hell of Mr Howard ever occupying 10 Downing Street, the *goyim* might think it odd that the head of the Liberals had not been invited to take up membership of the council. He therefore deemed it prudent to extend such an invitation.

A member asked whether the council might not run the risk of alienating the strictly Orthodox sections of Anglo-Jewry in the event of such an invitation being extended. The Chair ruled this intervention out of order on the grounds that it was provocative. He added that the fact that the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations was not in membership of the Board of Deputies had never impaired the Board’s “fully representative” character. (Shouts of “hear, hear!” from sundry participants.)

On a show of hands, it was decided *nem.con* that shows of hands were not what was wanted at the council, and the lay head of the Liberals was sure to say nice things about the council once the invitation to join was extended to him.

Meeting of the Finance Committee, undated

The Chair said that Geoffrey Alderman, an awkward so-and-so if ever there was one, was going round asking typically awkward questions about where the council got its money from. The fact that council members included Lord Levy (aka “Mr Cashpoint”), Sir Ronald Cohen (chairman of Apax investment managers) and Sir Trevor Chinn (head of Lex Services), and that these three entrepreneurs had all given money to the Blair-led Labour party, spoke for itself.

What did Alderman think the council was? A Purim *spiel*? (Shouts of “hear hear!” from sundry participants.)

II BRITISH JEWS and BRITISH POLITICS