

ANOTHER WAY, ANOTHER TIME: RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVISM AND THE SACKS RABBINATE

BY MEIR PERSOFF

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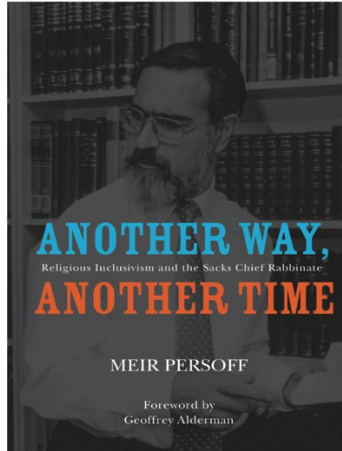
Review by
Keith Kahn-Harris

We don't know exactly when he will announce his departure, but there is no doubt that we are in the twilight of Jonathan Sacks' Chief Rabbinate. With nearly two decades in the job and a seat in the House of Lords to retire to, there is little keeping him in what has been an unforgiving and thankless task. For the rest of us, it is a good time to evaluate the Sacks Chief Rabbinate and to consider what future — if any — the institution has in twenty-first century Anglo-Jewry.

Meir Persoff's *Another Way, Another Time* represents an important attempt to do just that. Persoff, for many years a journalist on the *Jewish Chronicle*, has spent the last few years on an extensive investigation into the Chief Rabbinate and the multiple communal controversies in which the institution has been enmeshed. His latest book is essentially a sequel to *Faith Against Reason: Religious Reform and the British Chief Rabbinate 1840-1990*, published in 2008, which demonstrated how Chief Rabbis have been fighting (and generally losing) a constant rear-guard action against religious pluralism in the British Jewish community since the mid nineteenth-century.

In *Another Way, Another Time*, Persoff looks at the many controversies over pluralism in which Sacks has been involved and at the wider internal struggles of the British Jewish

community in a time of religious diversity. From the controversy surrounding Sacks's disparagement of the Masorti movement in the early 1990s; to the short life of the organisation he set up in the early part of his office, Jewish Continuity; to the offence caused by his leaked letter to Dayan Padwa insulting Hugo Gryn after his death in 1996; to the ferocious charedi criticism that caused him to amend his book *The Dignity of Difference*; to the recent debacle over JFS admissions: Sacks has consistently offended those to the left and right of him. His ideology of 'inclusivism' — that purported to welcome every Jew regardless of affiliation, while refusing to recognise non-orthodox denominations — has, according to opinion, either failed to be practised



or was never an appropriate stance for someone claiming to represent the entire Jewish community.

Persoff concludes: 'The progression of events, reactions and ramifications traced over the pages of this volume ... leaves little doubt that, in today's world, the Chief Rabbinate has run its course, and that an alternative form of leadership is called for which recognises both the plurality of the community and the application of inclusivism in deed as well as word.'

Persoff draws on a broad range of sources in *Another Way, Another Time*,

including the private correspondence of Sidney Brichto, Immanuel Jakobovits and Louise Jacobs. His indefatigable journalist's instinct and connections has served him well in what is undoubtedly the best researched book on contemporary Anglo-Jewry. At the same time though, Sacks himself remains an enigma and Persoff's sources shed frustratingly little light on what lay behind some of his most controversial decisions. While the book clearly implies that Sacks has consistently bowed to ultra-orthodox opinion despite his own modern orthodoxy, there is no 'smoking gun' that would conclusively demonstrate how beholden he is to those on the right who do not respect his office. (For example, we have no confirmation here of the rumours that the Padwa letter was leaked by the charedim to 'teach Sacks a lesson', or that Dayan Ehrentreu of the United Synagogue Beth Din drafted the infamous letter in the rabbinic Hebrew that Sacks himself would have been unable to successfully wield).

Of course Persoff can only publish what he finds confirmed in the sources to which he has access. But there is a greater problem with his use of sources in *Another Way, Another Time*: Persoff cannot seem to stop quoting them at length and often in full. Indeed, as in *Faith Against Reason*, the book is gravely lacking in narrative and analysis; it is a series of quotes tied together by a frustratingly tenuous thread. Some of the quotes are important but others are unnecessary, even dull, and there are whole sections of the book that comprise only quotes unaccompanied by any explanation of their significance.

Another Way, Another Time is a valuable endeavour in bringing to light previously obscure events in recent British Jewish communal history. As a book it is deeply flawed. It is best seen as a collection of materials that will undoubtedly be much discussed as historians contend with the task of assessing the record of Jonathan Sacks, this most complex of Chief Rabbis.

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