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Review:

*“We are not only English Jews – we are Jewish Englishmen”:
The Making of an Anglo-Jewish Identity, 1840–1880*

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“We are not only English Jews – we are Jewish Englishmen”: The Making of an Anglo-Jewish Identity, 1840–1880, Sara Abosch-Jacobson (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1-64469-085-7, pp. xx + 202, \$99.00.

The subject of Abosch-Jacobson’s awkwardly titled book is “the formation of an Anglo-Jewish communal identity” (p. xvi) in the period between 1840 and 1880. She argues that changes in communal institutions and religious habits in these four decades, intended to accommodate Jewishness to the surrounding English milieu, generated “a new hybrid Anglo-Jewry” (p. 165). This is not a novel argument. The notion that Englishness inflected the Jewishness of English Jews in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a well-established theme in Anglo-Jewish historiography. There is, however, a dimension to Abosch-Jacobson’s argument that, if not new, has not always featured this explicitly in previous studies. She is concerned with communal identity, that package of assumptions that binds both leaders and followers in a common enterprise.

There is a problem, however, with invoking the notion of communal identity. In brief, it is the difficulty of differentiating communal identity from personal identity – if, in fact, this can be done. How, one might reasonably ask, can institutions and structures articulate an identity that is somehow separate from the identities of those who create them and manage their affairs? If there is no difference, then why introduce the concept of communal identity, a notion that reifies the Anglo-Jewish community, giving it a transcendent life independent of the flesh-and-blood Jews who are its constituents?

Writing about identity in modern Jewish history, whether in Britain or elsewhere, is a challenge for another reason as well. Those who address the subject today generally preface their work with the acknowledgement that personal identity is neither static nor monolithic, but complex, multidimensional, and multilayered, constantly responsive to changing circumstances. In any given situation, some aspects come to the fore while others move to the side. Judging from her text and her bibliography, Abosch-Jacobson is not familiar with these considerations. The notion of hybridity, which structures her account, does not capture the fluidity and complexity of how individuals see themselves, and how they express what they see.

Implicit in Abosch-Jacobson's book is the idea that in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, English Jews embraced a new set of notions about the meaning of their Jewishness. This claim would require her to describe what English Jews thought about being Jewish both at the start of her period and its conclusion. Since she does not do this, it remains unclear how the communal identity of Anglo-Jewry changed in this period. Specifically, she does not tell us what she thinks the new identity supposedly forged in this period replaced. I would suggest that she is unable to do so because the changes in perception and sentiment that she traces to the period between 1840 and 1880 long predated these decades, and were rooted in the Georgian period.

The Anglo-Jewish confrontation with modernity began decades before the 1840s. What was distinctive about her period was not the emergence of new ways of thinking about being Jewish but the emergence of institutions and structures embodying these sentiments, largely, but not exclusively, in response to the challenges of demographic growth. Thus, most of her book is devoted to telling a story that has already been told – the creation of the West London Synagogue of British Jews, the first reform congregation in England; the emergence of an activist chief rabbinate with the election of Nathan Marcus Adler; the growing prominence of the Board of Deputies under the leadership of Moses Montefiore; the establishment of the Jewish Board of Guardians and other bodies that embraced Victorian “charity” practices; and the growth of private and communal schools offering secular and religious subjects to the children of both the lower and middle classes.

To the author's credit, in telling her story, she mines a hitherto neglected source: advertisements and notices that appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle*. Private Jewish boarding schools; kosher hotels, boarding houses, and restaurants; businesses seeking employees, and men and women looking for employment; even *mikvaot* regularly advertised their services. These notices constitute a treasure trove for historians of religious behaviour, gender roles, and other social history topics. For example, a Mrs. Jacobson advertised in 1863 that she had moved her “Jewish Bath” establishment, which operated under the authority of the chief rabbi, from Mitre Square (near Duke's Place and Bevis Marks in the easternmost reaches of the City) to Westbourne Park (close to the Bayswater Synagogue and the new Jewish centres of residence in Maida Vale and West Kilburn). This

notice highlights patterns of settlement in London at mid-century, and testifies to the persistence of strict Orthodox practice among some Jewish families who made the westward trek to leafier middle-class enclaves. The advertisements also reveal some of the employment opportunities available to single women: as governesses, companions, housekeepers, lady's maids, cooks, needle women, and servants. One woman seeking employment in 1845 as a housekeeper, upper nurse, or needle woman mentioned that she understood Hebrew and had no objection to living in the country.

The overall utility of this volume is vitiated, however, by its failure to take account of scholarship that appeared between its initial composition in 2006, when it was submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation at the State University of Buffalo, New York, and its eventual publication in 2019. The most glaring example of this is Abosch-Jacobson's neglect of Michael Clark's *Albion and Jerusalem: The Anglo-Jewish Community in the Post-Emancipation Era, 1858–1887*, which Oxford University Press published in 2009. Clark's book covers much of the same ground as hers, but is more expansive, richly documented, and closely argued. Abosch-Jacobson never refers to Clark's work nor does she include it in her bibliography. Indeed, in her review of historical literature on British Jews at the start of the book, she asserts that nothing has been written on the development of Anglo-Jewish identity in this period. She does list a few works in her bibliography that were published after 2006 but, with the exception of Abigail Green's biography of Moses Montefiore, they are not relevant to her subject. For example, while I was pleased to see my *Leaving the Jewish Fold*, which appeared in 2015, in the bibliography, I fail to see its bearing on her topic. The editor of the series in which this volume appears bears some of the responsibility for the publication of a work that was already out-of-date a decade ago.

Errors in British history and the Hebrew language also sow doubts about Abosch-Jacobson's mastery of her topic. She writes, for example, that the only "Jewish" national political figure between Benjamin Disraeli and Michael Howard was Herbert Samuel, thus omitting Edwin Montagu and Leslie Hore-Belisha, political figures who were more formidable than Samuel. It is also curious that she closes the span following Disraeli with Michael Howard, rather than the more contemporary Ed Miliband, perhaps because Miliband was still a backbencher when she submitted her dissertation in 2006. She also confuses the Hebrew word *heder* (room or elementary Hebrew class) with the word *herem* (communal ban), and

the word *anah* (he answered) with the word *edah* (community) (pp. 16, 26). In short, it is difficult to recommend this book to those with either an academic or personal interest in Anglo-Jewish history.

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