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“No religion could be more spiritual than ours”: Anglo-Jewish spiritualist societies in the interwar period

SAMUEL GLAUBER-ZIMRA AND BOAZ HUSS

On 17 July 1929, a large crowd gathered in Caxton Hall, Westminster, London, for the inaugural meeting of the Jewish Society for Psychical Research – “Ha-aur Yisrael” (JSPR). A series of speakers, some of whom spoke in halting, Yiddish-accented English, ascended the dais to extol the truth of spiritualism – the modern movement that argues that the dead survive in spirit form and may be contacted by the living – and the great importance of the nascent society’s mission, namely, to serve as “a Jewish Association for the purpose of Psychic Research generally, and its Jewish aspect in particular”.¹ A high point of the meeting was the reading of written remarks sent by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), the celebrated author and leading spiritualist propagandist, who proclaimed that he was “delighted to hear that a people who once had such direct Spiritual relations, as the Jews, should again turn their attention from the past to the present and make religion a living thing”. The meeting closed, following the ratification of the society’s constitution and the election of officers, with a prayer declaring the great unity of God and a recital of the *Shema*.²

Spiritualism was widely practised by British Jews in the interwar period, and the JSPR was only one of several Jewish spiritualist organizations established in England during these years.³ British Jews took up spiritualism for many of the same reasons as their non-Jewish compatriots. With its

1 “Jewish Society for Psychical Research: Inaugural Meeting”, *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter, *JC*), 26 July 1929, 23; “A naye khevre ‘Or Yisroel’ in London: der gloyben in spiritualizm”, *Lublener togblat*, 13 Sept. 1929, 6; “The Jewish Society for Psychic Research: A New Society Launched”, *Light*, 10 Aug. 1929, 380; “Jewish Society Inaugurated”, *The Two Worlds*, 9 Aug. 1929, 508.

2 “Jewish Society Inaugurated”. On Conan Doyle’s spiritualist activities, see Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921).

3 On interwar British Jewry, see David Dee, *The “Estranged” Generation? Social and Generational Change in Interwar British Jewry* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 183–226.

promise of contact with deceased relatives and what were widely understood as empirical demonstrations of survival after death, spiritualism appealed to the Yiddish-speaking tailors and shopkeepers of the East End of London, as well as to the acculturated members of the upwardly mobile middle class; indeed, interest in spiritualism reached the highest echelons of British Jewry. For some participants, Jewish spiritualist organizations provided a way into an increasingly popular movement within British society, while certain Anglo-Jewish spiritualists sought in spiritualism a higher meaning and maintained a hope that spiritualism would bring about a revival of Jewish religious life. Significantly, spiritualism offered a translation of existing traditional beliefs about the afterlife into modern modalities.⁴ Despite significant opposition from many within the Jewish community, Jewish spiritualist organizations flourished for nearly two decades up to the outbreak of the Second World War, producing a body of literature that has yet to receive scholarly attention.

Spiritualism emerged in 1848 in upstate New York and spread rapidly across the globe.⁵ Scholarly accounts of British spiritualism have generally focused on nineteenth-century developments, giving the impression that the movement had declined by the start of the First World War.⁶ Yet it was in the interwar period that the movement reached its numerical zenith in England.⁷ This spiritualist resurgence was fuelled in part by the mass bereavement suffered during the Great War, as countless mourners sought contact with husbands and sons who had fallen in battle.⁸ Interwar British spiritualism was characterized, in particular, by

4 See Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 23.

5 For general histories of spiritualism, see among others Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*, 2 vols. (London: Methuen & Co., 1902); R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); John Patrick Devaney, "Spiritualism", in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 1074–82; Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 177–253.

6 See Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

7 Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 161; for accounts of interwar British spiritualism, 155–62; Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*.

8 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 54–77.

its well-developed organizational structure. The number of spiritualist societies increased rapidly following the war, and by 1934 it was estimated that there were more than 2,000 societies active in England.⁹ British spiritualism was likewise increasingly scientized during this period; the Society for Psychical Research, whose distinguished members had been investigating spiritualist phenomena since 1882, was joined by organizations such as the British College of Psychic Science, founded by J. Hewat and Barbara McKenzie in 1920, and Harry Price’s National Laboratory of Psychical Research, established in 1923.¹⁰ Both these factors, namely, the organizational model of spiritualist societies and the movement’s carefully curated scientific image, contributed to the success of interwar Anglo-Jewish spiritualism.

In what follows, we offer a preliminary survey of interwar Anglo-Jewish spiritualist organizations and how their members related spiritualism to Judaism. Concentrating on London Jewry, we focus on two distinct spheres: the Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who formed the city’s first Jewish spiritualist societies in the heart of the East End, and the more affluent, accultured members of the JSPR, many of whom were also involved in other esoteric movements. We then turn our attention to the sundry rabbinic responses offered to Anglo-Jewish spiritualism and the ways in which Anglo-Jewish spiritualists negotiated their Jewish identity with their spiritualist convictions and practices. Many British Jews were concerned in the interwar period with growing religious indifference, and these anxieties played out on both sides of the debate over Jewish involvement in spiritualism.¹¹ While certain rabbis condemned spiritualism and blamed its increasing popularity on the widespread abandonment of religion, Anglo-Jewish spiritualists and their supporters argued for the permissibility of spiritualism under Jewish law – despite the apparent biblical prohibition against necromancy – and many of them turned to spiritualism in an effort to bring about a spiritual revival of contemporary Judaism.

9 Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, 161.

10 Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society*, 16; Elizabeth R. Valentine, “Institutionalisation and the History of Psychical Research in Great Britain in the 20th Century”, in *Okkultismus im Gehäuse Institutionalisierungen der Parapsychologie im 20. Jahrhundert im internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Anna Lux and Sylvia Paletschek (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 133–48. On the Society for Psychical Research, see Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

11 Dee, “Estranged” Generation?, 149–52.



1 Tobias and Ethel Blaustein, from T. Blaustein, *Spiritualizm: meynungen, fakten un erklarungen* (London: Fraynd, 1925). Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Jewish spiritualist societies in the East End

The East End of London was a centre of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century as thousands of Russian Jews fleeing pogroms and economic uncertainty came to settle in the Whitechapel district.¹² Spiritualism had begun to spread throughout Eastern Europe at this time, yet it was only on arriving in England, with its well-established model of spiritualist societies, that East European Jewish immigrants established formal Jewish spiritualist organizations.¹³ The first Jewish spiritualist society in England, the National Jewish Spiritualist Society (NJSS), was founded in April 1919 with the stated object to “investigate

12 For accounts of the Jewish East End, see William J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals: 1875–1914* (London: Duckworth, 1975); J. Green, *A Social History of the Jewish East End in London, 1914–1939* (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991); Ed Glinert, *East End Chronicles* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 122–47. On this wave of immigration, see Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 127–80.

13 On nascent nineteenth-century Jewish spiritualism in Eastern Europe, see J. H. Chajes, “Entzauberung and Jewish Modernity: On ‘Magic’, Enlightenment, and Faith”, *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 6 (2007): 191–200; Isaac Ewen, “A Séance in the Shtetl, translated and introduced by Sam Glauber-Zimra”, *The Barnacle Goose* 2 (2021): 30–33.

and demonstrate spiritual phenomena, and to propagate the material, intellectual and spiritual benefits of Spiritualism to humanity”.¹⁴

The NJSS was established by a small circle of East End Jewish spiritualists led by the Blaustein (at times, Blanstein) family, immigrants from Galicia who, beginning in 1915, held weekly séances in their tenement apartment off Whitechapel Road. Tobias Blaustein (1859–1939) and his wife Ethel (1865–1933), the circle’s primary medium (she was described as speaking six languages when under trance control, “though she was limited to two when normal”), advocated for spiritualism in Yiddish together with their son Maurice (born in 1898), who wrote as well in English.¹⁵ The society was set up with the assistance of Thomas Pugh, a non-Jewish spiritualist involved in the formation of a number of spiritualist organizations, and affiliated itself with the Spiritualists’ National Union, the largest spiritualist umbrella organization in England.¹⁶ Tobias Blaustein authored the first full-length Yiddish work on spiritualism to appear in England, *Spiritualizm: meynungen, fakten un erklerungen* (Spiritualism: Opinions, Facts, and Explanations).¹⁷ The book’s imminent appearance was announced in November 1921 in the spiritualist periodical *Light*, although it was not ultimately brought out until 1925.¹⁸ The book presents the fundamental principles of spiritualist belief and practice as explicated by the well-known theorists of spiritualism Conan Doyle and Sir Oliver Lodge (1851–1940).¹⁹ Blaustein related spiritualism to earlier Jewish sources, such as the biblical account of Saul and the Witch of Endor, as well as the famed *magid*, or heavenly mentor, of the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi

14 “Formation of a Jewish Spiritualist Society”, *The Two Worlds*, 18 April 1919, 127; “Formation of Jewish Spiritualist Society”, *Light*, 25 April 1919, 135.

15 Maurice Blanstein, “A Good Clairvoyant Description”, *The Two Worlds*, 18 Feb. 1921, 77; “Death of a Jewish Spiritualist”, *The Two Worlds*, 31 March 1933, 254; Maurice Barbanell, “An Atheist has his Psychic Career foretold”, *Psychic News*, 13 March 1937, 5; Barbanell, “Jewish Spiritualist Pioneer passes on”, *Psychic News*, 10 June 1939, 5; Henry Sanders, “In London’s East End”, *Psychic News*, 17 June 1939, 11. Maurice Blaustein was later involved in the JSPP.

16 “Formation of a Jewish Spiritualist Society”; “The International Congress”, *The Two Worlds*, 14 July 1922, 322. On Pugh’s activities, see Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, 157.

17 T. Blaustein, *Spiritualizm: meynungen, fakten un erklerungen* (London: Fraynd, 1925). The first Yiddish book on spiritualism, A. Almi’s *Di tseyte ekzistenz*, appeared in New York in 1921.

18 “From the Lighthouse Window”, *Light*, 5 Nov. 1921, 717.

19 On Lodge, see James Mussell and Graeme Gooday, eds., *A Pioneer of Connection: Recovering the Life and Work of Oliver Lodge* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).

Joseph Karo, identified by Blaustein as a spirit.²⁰ The book also contains a brief essay by Ethel Blaustein in which she advocates for spiritualism as a source of consolation for bereaved Jewish mothers.²¹ With that said, this was not the first Yiddish work on spiritualism to be published in England, or even in the East End: the veteran Yiddish journalist Isaac Stone (1855–1916), commonly known by his pen name Der Zokn (the old man), published two spiritualism-inflected articles on immortality and the afterlife in 1915 and 1916, respectively, in the rabbinic periodical *Rashe Alfe Yisrael*.²²

In its several years of existence, the NJSS held regular séances, offered public demonstrations of clairvoyance, and organized lectures on spiritualist topics held at various East End Jewish institutions, such as the Central Jewish Literary Society, the Jews' Free School Old Boys' Club, and the Ghetto Social Circle of Bethnal Green.²³ Its most prominent “recruit” was Maurice Barbanell (1902–1981), who went on to have an illustrious career as a leading voice of British spiritualism and founding editor of the spiritualist newspaper *Psychic News*, although his spiritualist identity came to supersede any deeper affiliation with Judaism.²⁴ The society's most notable event was a January 1922 lecture by Conan Doyle on “The New Revelation”, arranged by Barbanell and held before an audience of many hundreds at the People's Palace on Mile End Road in the East End.²⁵ The society aspired at one point to establish a spiritualist synagogue in the belief that “the many, many Jews who turn to this cause will know

20 Blaustein, *Spiritualizm*, 17–18, 26. On Karo and his *magid*, see R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

21 Blaustein, *Spiritualizm*, 13.

22 Isaac Stone (Der Zokn), “Unzer lebn nokh'n toyt, oder hashares hanefesh: interesanter iberblik iber professor Bergson's filozofya”, *Rashe Alfe Yisrael* 1 (1915): 41–57; Stone, “Neshome's unshterblikhkayt un menshens eybige perzenlikhkayt: di shita fun sir Oliver Lodzsh”, *Rashe Alfe Yisrael* 2 (1916): 21–6. On Stone, see *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 6 (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1965), 375–7. *Rashe Alfe Yisrael* was edited by Rabbi Joseph Shapotshnik (1882–1937), a controversial East End figure and self-styled chief rabbi who gained notoriety in religious circles; see Harry Rabinowicz, *A World Apart: The Story of the Chasidim in Britain* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), 56–66.

23 Henry Sanders, “The Activities of the National Jewish Spiritualist Society”, *The Two Worlds*, 2 Feb. 1921, 51–2.

24 “Maurice Barbanell's Huge Contribution to Spiritualism”, *Psychic News*, n.d., <https://www.psychicnews.org.uk/articles/contribution-spiritualism> (accessed 23 May 2021); “How Dare a Jew be a Spiritualist! Some Credulous Ideas about ‘Divine Protection’”, *Psychic News*, 22 June 1935, 9.

25 “Sir A. Conan Doyle at the People's Palace”, *The Two Worlds*, 10 Jan. 1922, 29.

they will derive a truer and better conception of their Judaic belief, and the Spiritualistic teaching will help to bind them more spiritually to their wonderful faith”. The proposed undertaking, the NJSS’s secretary boldly proclaimed, would be “the greatest thing a Jew has ever done at any times [sic]”.²⁶

With that, the NJSS disbanded at some point midway through the decade, succeeded in part by a series of smaller Jewish spiritualist societies that continued to operate in the East End throughout the interwar period.²⁷ These included, most notably, the Jewish Spiritualist Centre (with further branches in Holloway, Tufnell Park, and Stamford Hill), and the London Jewish Spiritualist Centre, which featured the Yiddish-speaking medium Ann Novak, who delivered lectures, organized open-circle séances, and demonstrated clairvoyance and psychometry.²⁸ These groups all generally held weekly séances, demonstrations of clairvoyance, and lectures on topics related to spiritualism, featuring both Jewish and non-Jewish speakers and mediums.²⁹ While Jewish spiritualist groups began to spread across London as Jewish residents left the East End for suburban neighbourhoods (a Jewish spiritualist society was set up in Golders Green, for instance, in 1937), as late as 1939 it was reported that three Jewish spiritualist societies continued to operate in the East End.³⁰ With that, the most prominent Anglo-Jewish spiritualist society of the interwar period materialized beyond the bounds of the East End and its Yiddish-speaking Jewish residents.

The Jewish Society for Psychological Research

It would be no exaggeration to state that the Jewish Society for Psychological (at times, Psychic) Research was born in the pages of the *Jewish Chronicle*,

26 “The Jews and Spiritualism”, *The Two Worlds*, 17 Feb. 1922, 81.

27 See “Correspondence Epitomised: Jews and Spiritualism”, *JC*, 21 June 1929, 34.

28 For locations of the Jewish Spiritualist Centre, see advertisements in *The Two Worlds*, 18 April 1930, 256; 10 June 1932, 384. On Novak, see “Spiritualism among the Jews: Medium’s Brave Fight in London’s East End”, *Psychic News*, 23 June 1934, 3; “She tells how she is controlled: A Medium describes her Sensations”, *Psychic News*, 22 Feb. 1936, 8; “Praise for Mrs. Novak”, *Psychic News*, 5 Sept. 1936, 11; “Mrs. Novak: Tribute”, *Psychic News*, 28 Aug. 1937, 11. On psychometry, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Theosophical Imagination”, *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 5 (2017): 3–39.

29 See e.g. *The Two Worlds*, 21 Feb. 1930, 127.

30 “Spiritualism is spreading among the Jews: Directed by ‘dead’ Hebrew Teachers”, *Psychic News*, 8 May 1937, 5; Barbanell, “Jewish Spiritualist Pioneer.”

arguably the most prominent newspaper in the annals of British Jewry.³¹ During the interwar period in particular, it is claimed, the newspaper “both reflected and influenced” the processes of acculturation and embourgeoisement that characterized British Jewry as a whole during these years.³² This dynamic extended to developments within Anglo-Jewish spiritualism, as well, for it was an endorsement from the *Jewish Chronicle* that led in part to the formation of the JSPR. The genesis of the society was in a letter to the newspaper from a Jewish esotericist named Dora E. Blumenthal (1881–1982), published on 25 January 1929:

I have become deeply interested in the spiritualistic movement and for some time past have been investigating the subject. Its truth has been wonderfully comforting to me and many around me, and I should very much like to find out others of our religion, who are also interested. I hope soon to start a centre for a study of the whole subject. Might I therefore ask for correspondence in your columns on the matter?³³

Blumenthal’s letter elicited more than a dozen responses published in subsequent issues of the paper that spring.³⁴ While some correspondents were critical of Blumenthal’s proposal – whether on the basis of the biblical prohibition of necromancy, that spiritualism was fraudulent and presented a psychological danger, or that Jews ought to concentrate their energies in order to “better help the living and not worry about the spirits of the dead” – a majority expressed considerable enthusiasm for the formation of a Jewish spiritualist society. A key endorsement came from the editorial staff of the *Jewish Chronicle* itself (the paper was then edited by Leopold J. Greenberg [1862–1931]), who wrote in an editorial that appeared on 8 February 1929:

More than one correspondent to our columns has, during the last week or two, urged the formation of a Jewish Society for the study of Spiritualism. The idea has been warmly challenged by other correspondents who suppose that Spiritualism is akin to witchcraft, and the enquiring of familiar spirits denounced and forbidden by the *Torah*. They therefore, quite rightly from their point of view, decry its encouragement among

31 On the *JC*, see *The Jewish Chronicle 1841–1941: A Century of Newspaper History* (London: Jewish Chronicle, 1949); David Cesarani, *The Jewish Chronicle and Anglo-Jewry, 1841–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

32 Cesarani, *Jewish Chronicle*, 133.

33 “Correspondence Epitomised: Spiritualism”, *JC*, 25 Jan. 1929, 12.

34 These letters are found under “Correspondence Epitomised: Spiritualism”, *JC*, all 1929, 1 Feb., 14; 8 Feb., 11; 15 Feb., 9; 1 March, 11; 8 March, 11; 22 March, 12; 5 April, 14; 12 April, 20.

Jews. But we believe they are mistaken. Spiritualism is a study of certain psychical phenomena that are said to exist, and which, it is alleged, manifest themselves in definite happenings. Thus it is scientific investigation from which many distinguished scientists have derived what they have no doubt are facts of Nature. Why Jews who feel an interest in this subject should not explore it, we fail to see. Nor should those who refuse to accept the conclusions to which Spiritualists have arrived, it seems to us, in reason, shut out categorically, as so many do, even the possibility of those conclusions being scientifically sound and proveable. Belief in a life after physical death for the soul or spirit of man is Jewish belief, and it is the essential basis of Spiritualism, which, however, is not a Creed, a Faith, or a Religion, but as we say, a scientific search which Jews can pursue without the least prejudice to their religious – or for that matter any of their other – obligations.³⁵

Spiritualism thus was to be regarded as a mode of scientific investigation, one in alignment with Jewish belief. This sentiment was further expressed in another letter, signed “Orthodox”, that went so far as to argue that “to deny the existence of psychic phenomena . . . is equivalent to denying electro-magnetism”.³⁶ Other proponents emphasized the spiritualist qualities inherent within Judaism. One correspondent, Regina M. Bloch, opined that while “the Judaic attitude to Spiritualism seems prone to misconceptions . . . No religion could be more spiritual than ours”.³⁷ Bloch (1889–1938), a well-known author, poet, and journalist who had previously taken part in the founding of the Jewish Theosophical Lodge in London and authored a book on the Sufi teacher Inayat Khan, joined Blumenthal in establishing the proposed society, personally soliciting an endorsement from Conan Doyle.³⁸ She was quickly elected chair of the society, a position she held for several years.

As described earlier, the inaugural meeting of the JSPR took place in July 1929. Press reports of the society’s initial meetings relate provisions from its constitution, as well as the objectives its founding members aimed to achieve in establishing a Jewish spiritualist society. Per the society’s constitution:

35 “Jews and Spiritualism”, JC, 8 Feb. 1929, 7.

36 “Correspondence Epitomised: Spiritualism”, JC, 22 March 1929, 12.

37 Ibid., 15 Feb. 1929, 9.

38 Regina M. Bloch, *The Confessions of Inayat Khan* (London: Sufi Publishing Society, 1915); “Jews and Spiritualism”, JC, 7 June 1929, 12. Bloch was also the sub-editor of *The Sufi: A Quarterly Magazine* in 1915–20. On Bloch’s activities, see “Jews and Theosophists: From Miss R. M. Bloch”, JC, 9 March 1928, 28; “Obituary: Miss R. M. Bloch”, JC, 4 March 1938, 12.

The Society shall be a Jewish association for the purpose of psychic research generally and of its Jewish aspect in particular.

It shall be known as The Jewish Society for Psychic Research – “Ha-aur Yisrael.” Its objects shall be (a) To seek knowledge of states or conditions existing in the after-life by means of study, logical evidence and psychic demonstration. (b) to enquire into and adjust any misconception that may surround the object of this society and the beliefs of its members as being opposed to Judaism. (c) To offer opportunities for the development of Spiritual Powers by the formation of Groups, e.g., Philosophical, Experimental, or Psychic, Healing, Spiritual development, etc., subject to the sanction of the Council, who must earnestly endeavour to exclude quackery and worthless demonstrations.³⁹

These three objectives – in short, acquiring first-hand knowledge of the afterlife, refuting Judaism’s opposition to spiritualism, and facilitating the development of spiritual powers – were set out at length by the speakers. Alexander Victor, the honorary secretary, argued that spiritualism rendered belief empirical. “With knowledge”, he claimed, “‘Le-olam Habo’ (the World to come) ceased to be a promise and became a fact”. Victor’s declaration reflected a broader sociological development, namely, that the modernization of Jewish society had led to a weakening of religious authority and greater scepticism towards traditional beliefs concerning the afterlife. This shift, together with the concomitant rise of scientific authority, prompted a turn to empirical sources of belief, such as spiritualism.⁴⁰ Indeed, Victor hoped that the JSPR would “exert a spiritual influence that would make acceptable and understandable much that certain teachers would have [the society’s members] accept with unconvincing explanations or even without question”, while in a subsequent meeting he voiced that spiritualism would “enable those who were spiritually in ‘Golus’ [exile] to truly visualize their ‘Gan Eden’”.⁴¹

The society likewise saw great urgency in correcting misperceptions that spiritualism was at odds with Judaism. While many Anglo-Jewish

39 “The Jewish Society for Psychic Research: A New Society Launched”, *Light*, 10 Aug. 1929, 380.

40 See James R. Lewis, “How Religions appeal to the Authority of Science”, in *Handbook of Religious Authority and Science*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 23–40. On religious trends in interwar British Jewry, see Dee, “Estranged” Generation?, 149–204.

41 “Jewish Society for Psychical Research”; “Jewish Psychical Research”, *The Two Worlds*, 15 Nov. 1929, 730; “Gan Eden”, the biblical Garden of Eden, is a traditional term for the heavenly abode.

opponents of spiritualism cited biblical and rabbinic sources prohibiting communication with the dead, Victor chalked up Jewish reticence about spiritualism to sociological factors. Although spiritualists had long grappled with the question of whether or not their movement constituted a religion, British spiritualist societies and publications were nominally Christian.⁴² The “many orthodox Jews” who had hitherto explored spiritualism had largely done so under the auspices of non-Jewish spiritualist societies, he claimed, and, given that “Gentile workers for the spiritual cause would naturally view the subject from the angle of their own religion”, these Jews took spiritualism to be entirely non-Jewish.⁴³ The JSPR would thus serve as a welcoming space for British Jews to engage with spiritualism, together with their co-religionists, in a familiar religious environment.

The JSPR’s plans included the formation of various subgroups under the charge of Leonard Bosman (1879–1936), the society’s director of research and a Jewish Theosophist who had published numerous works on Kabbalah and Theosophy.⁴⁴ These were to include a healing group, a philosophical group to “study the powers of men from the Jewish standpoint”, and a self-preparation group for the cultivation of “those powers mentioned in the Hebrew readings”.⁴⁵ Bosman argued that it was necessary for society members to develop “knowledge of the inner realities” in order that “they should link up with those whom the world called dead”. He further asserted that “Unseen Hebrews” were assisting in the formation of the society and that the society’s Hebrew moniker,

42 For an unmatched study of spiritualism as a religion, see George Lawton, *The Drama of Life after Death: A Study of the Spiritualist Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932).

43 “Jewish Society for Psychical Research”.

44 E.g. Leonard Bosman, *The Mysteries of the Qabbalah* (London: Dharma Press, 1913); Bosman, *The Music of the Spheres, or, Cosmic Harmony: An Occult Revelation* (London: Dharma Press, 1914); Bosman, *A Plea for Judaism* (Adyar, India: Association of Hebrew Theosophists, 1926). On Bosman, see R. A. Gilbert, “Introduction”, in Leonard Bosman, *The Meaning and Philosophy of Numbers* (Berwick, ME: Ibis Press, 2005), viii; Boaz Huss, “‘Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews’: Jewish Theosophists and their Perceptions of Kabbalah”, in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 137–66; Huss, “‘To Study Judaism in Light of Theosophy and Theosophy in the Light of Judaism’: The Association of Hebrew Theosophists and its Missions to the Jews and Gentiles”, in *Theosophy Across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement*, ed. Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 253–78.

45 “Jewish Society for Psychical Research: Inaugural Meeting”.

“Ha-aur Yisrael”, the Light of Israel, had been suggested in a message from the “other side”.⁴⁶

Apart from the stated goals delineated in its constitution, the founding members of the JSPR frequently expressed an aspiration to bring about a Jewish renewal through spiritualism. Many of their declarations reflect widely held concerns of religious malaise on the part of interwar British Jewry, albeit with a spiritualist twist.⁴⁷ “Judaism as a living religion once teemed with mysticism”, Bloch observed in her remarks at the inaugural meeting, yet “[i]n caring for the materialistic side of life the Jew had lost traditions that were once his”. Alluding to Jewish settlement in Palestine, she exclaimed that “the Jewish people were flocking back to Zion. Would that they would flock to the Zion of the spirit!”⁴⁸ Judaism, she argued, had lost its “inner temple of spirit” such that “the ‘Shechena’ no longer had a resting place”,⁴⁹ while she lamented, following a discussion of “auric readings” at the society’s third meeting, that “[t]he Jew of to-day seemed to have lost the beautiful gifts he once possessed. With the movement promoted by their Society a means may be established whereby he may be blessed with their return”.⁵⁰

The founding of the JSPR received considerable press coverage. While the activities of other Jewish spiritualist societies were by and large only discussed in spiritualist periodicals such as *Light*, *The Two Worlds*, and, from 1932 onwards, *Psychic News*, the inaugural meeting of the JSPR was not only covered in the *London Jewish Chronicle* and its rival, the *Jewish Guardian*, but also in the Jewish press across Europe, North Africa, and North America.⁵¹ Many were struck by the society’s name, the Jewish Society for

46 “Jewish Society for Psychological Research”. It is telling that this last part of Bosman’s message, typical for spiritualist publications, was not included in the report of the meeting that appeared in the *JC*.

47 See Dee, “Estranged” Generation?, 149–52.

48 “Jewish Society Inaugurated”, *The Two Worlds*, 9 Aug. 1929, 508; “Jewish Society for Psychological Research”.

49 “Jewish Psychological Research”. In a 1929 letter to Moses Gaster, Blumenthal referenced the JSPR’s “glorious aim the beginning of the rebuilding of the Temple”; Gaster Papers, UCL Special Collections, London, 47/177.

50 “Jewish Researchers discuss the Aura”, *The Two Worlds*, 13 Dec. 1929, 791.

51 “Jewish Society for Psychological Research: Inaugural Meeting”; “Jewish Society for Psychic Research”, *Jewish Guardian*, 26 July 1929, 11; “Form Jewish Society for Psychic Research”, *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (New York), 2 Aug. 1929, 8; “Une société juive de recherches”, *Israël* (Cairo), 16 Aug. 1929, 3; “A naye khevre ‘Or Yisroel’ in London”; see also “International Notes”, *Psychic Research: The Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research* 23, no. 10 (Oct. 1929): 563.

Psychical Research, which clearly emulated that of the prestigious Society for Psychical Research.⁵² Yet this same name led to some confusion about the society’s relation to spiritualism, as the original Society for Psychical Research was not a spiritualist society, but a learned society for the investigation of psychic forces as a whole, including those allegedly produced by spiritualist mediums.⁵³ It appears that the ambiguity inherent in the JSPR’s name was a reflection, in part, of the broad range of esoteric interests beyond spiritualism that marked its constituents. The founding members Bosman, Bloch, Henry S. L. Polak (1882–1959), and Blumenthal all had ties to the Theosophical Society,⁵⁴ while Samuel Sarna (1878–1967), who delivered several lectures to the society, was a noted phrenologist.⁵⁵ By branding themselves as a society for “psychical research” rather than strictly spiritualism, the JSPR was able to serve as a big-tent organization for Jewish esotericists of various affiliations.⁵⁶ Blumenthal, in particular, who instigated the chain of correspondence in the *Jewish Chronicle* that led to the establishment of the JSPR, had a more expansive vision for the society’s activities. In a further letter to the paper from December 1929, she proposed to give the society a new name that was equally loaded with significance, “The Golden Dawn”, a clear allusion to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a hierarchical magical society active in Great Britain at the turn of the century.⁵⁷ The Golden Dawn, Blumenthal wrote,

52 The correspondent for the *Lubliner togblat* deemed the name “resounding” (*klingendigen*).

53 The American journal *Psychic Research* expressed confusion as to why a spiritualist organization would style itself a “society for psychical research”, while a report in the *Neues Wiener Journal*, 24 Feb. 1930, 6, referred to the organization as the “Jewish Society for Spiritualist Research”.

54 Polak was a close friend of Gandhi and supporter of the Indian independence movement; see Shimon Lev, “Gandhi and his Jewish Theosophist Supporters in South Africa”, in Chajes and Huss, *Theosophical Appropriations*, 245–70. For his activities in the JSPR, see “Jewish Interest in Reincarnation”, *The Two Worlds*, 22 March 1935, 187.

55 Sarna’s lectures were published as S. Sarna, *My Attitude towards Psychical Research: An Address given before the Jewish Society for Psychic Research* (Manchester: Two Worlds Publishing Co., 1932); Sarna, *Psychical Research and the Spirit Hypothesis* (Manchester: Two Worlds Publishing Co., 1935); Sarna, “Truth in Relation to Survival (Summary of Address given before the Jewish S.P.R.)”, *The Two Worlds*, 19 June 1936, 389. For his membership in the British Phrenological Society, see “Editorial Effervescence”, *The Popular Phrenologist* 5, no. 52 (April 1900): 42.

56 This is apparent from Yehuda Amias, “Searching the Beyond: Psychic Research and the Jew”, *World Jewry*, 12 Oct. 1934, 566–7. Amias was then the JSPR’s honorary secretary.

57 See Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

would constitute “a nucleus of people who were interested in something higher than the physical plane” with “the main stress . . . laid on Spiritual unfoldment”. “Why not habit ourselves to meditate?”, she urged the readers of the *Jewish Chronicle*: “It brings strength and power and leads to the highest. In this way only can we learn to know God and Divine Love”.⁵⁸ The JSPR evidently did not move in this direction, and Blumenthal in 1932 organized an independent centre for “spiritual healing and supernormal photography” in South London.⁵⁹

The JSPR maintained an active schedule of weekly activities in a number of central London locations until its apparent demise in 1937.⁶⁰ Much like the East End Jewish spiritualist societies, these included lectures on spiritualist and general occult topics and demonstrations of clairvoyance and psychometry, as well as dramatic performances with spiritualist themes and informal gatherings for the “exchange of views and psychic experiences”.⁶¹ It is difficult to establish precisely how many Jews joined the JSPR, although it appears that its membership numbered in the hundreds. A 1935 report in the *Jewish Chronicle* relates that the society was then led by a governing council of sixteen and had “over 200 contributing members, with a mailing list of a further 200”, although membership was not limited to Jews.⁶² An indication of interest outside London comes from an April 1930 report of the establishment of the Manchester Jewish Psychic Research Society, which pledged to cooperate with the JSPR.⁶³

While several leaders of East End Jewish spiritualist societies, such as Ann Novak and Maurice Blaustein, took part in JSPR meetings, the society made no attempts to cooperate with their Yiddish-speaking co-religionists.⁶⁴ Turning in the other direction, the JSPR served as a bridge

58 “Jewish Society for Psychic Research”, *JC*, 6 Dec. 1929, 12.

59 “Newsy Notes”, *The Two Worlds*, 3 June 1932, 359. Blumenthal in 1933 wrote to the Indian guru Meher Baba describing herself as a “natural healer” and declaring that her life was dedicated to “my Divine Father’s business”; Avatar Meher Baba http://52.76.1.228/CA_1_7/jaibaba/index.php/Detail/objects/4308 (accessed 21 Jan. 2021).

60 The latest indication of the JSPR’s existence we have found is an advertisement in *Psychic News*, 2 Jan. 1937, 10.

61 “Spiritualists in a Psychic Play: Jewish Society Stages ‘Outward Bound’”, *Psychic News*, 3 Feb. 1934, 8; “Jewish Researchers discuss the Aura”.

62 “Jews and Psychical Research: A steadily increasing Society”, *JC*, 18 Jan. 1935, 34. A report in the Austrian press that thousands had joined the society in early 1930 is surely exaggerated; “Eine jüdische Gessellschaft für Seelenforschung”, *Neues Wiener Journal*, 24 Feb. 1930, 6.

63 “Spiritualism among the Jews”, *The Two Worlds*, 4 Apr. 1930, 215.

64 Novak occasionally served as a medium for JSPR meetings; see advertisement in

between its Jewish members and non-Jewish spiritualists and religious leaders. Indeed, many, if not most, of the lecturers who spoke at the JSPP were non-Jews. These included Aftab-ud-din Ahmad (1901–1956), the imam of the Woking mosque in London;⁶⁵ the Indian Sanskrit scholar Hara Prasad Shastri (1882–1956), who had previously served as the president of the Saturn Theosophical lodge in Shanghai;⁶⁶ and the influential scientific expositors of spiritualism J. Arthur Findlay (1883–1964) and Harry Price (1881–1948).⁶⁷ In short, the JSPP in its activities aspired to forge ties with the broader British spiritualist milieu and establish a bona fide Jewish spiritualist society to equal existing non-Jewish societies, as befitted its accultured middle-class membership.

Rabbinic attitudes to Anglo-Jewish spiritualism

British rabbis had already condemned spiritualism prior to the establishment of the first Jewish spiritualist society, the NJSS, in 1919.⁶⁸ With that, increasing Anglo-Jewish spiritualist activity in the interwar period gave rise to a concomitant rabbinic backlash, as a number of sermons published in the *Jewish Chronicle* declared spiritualism unfit for Jews. An unsigned sermon from 1920 situated the Jewish interest in spiritualism within the broader establishment anxiety over the perceived threat of religious decline.⁶⁹ The newly fashionable spiritualistic phenomena, it was argued, were “the sorrowful features of our day which betoken the loss and failure of true religion”.⁷⁰ A 1931 sermon penned by a Revd. M. Bloch, “Spiritualism and the Jew”, attended to the standing of spiritualism in Halakhah (Jewish law). Noting that “as far as can be ascertained the

Psychic News, 1 Oct. 1932, 16. Blaustein delivered a lecture to the JSPP, “The History of Jewish Spiritualism”, *Psychic News*, 15 July 1933, 12.

65 *The Two Worlds*, 18 Jan. 1935, 45; 12 July 1935, 457; “Moslem tells the Jews”, *Psychic News*, 3 Aug. 1935, 6.

66 *The Two Worlds*, 12 April 1935, 241. On Shastri and his activities in the Theosophical Society in China, see Chuang Chienhui, “Theosophical Movements in Modern China: The Education provided by Theosophists at the Shanghai International Settlement,” in Krämer and Strube, *Theosophy across Boundaries*, 149–78, esp. 171–2 n. 29.

67 Findlay, whose most famous book, *On the Edge of the Etheric* (1931), later became the first work on spiritualism translated into Hebrew, delivered an address, “Survival after Death, scientifically explained”; *Psychic News*, 13 May 1933, 12. For Price’s lecture, see *Psychic News*, 30 Dec. 1933, 12.

68 See e.g. “A Sermon for the Week: The Witch of Endor”, *JC*, 13 Dec. 1913, 18–19.

69 See Dee, “Estranged” Generation?, 149–52.

70 “A Sermon for the Week: Judaism and Spiritualism”, *JC*, 3 Dec. 1920, 15.

responsible religious authorities in this country have taken no steps to enlighten the members of this society [the JSPR] or the community in general as to whether the objects and practices of such an organization are in accord with Jewish Law and Tradition or not”, Bloch took it on himself to carry out such an examination. Having identified spiritualism as one of the forbidden divinatory practices proscribed in the Bible, Talmud, and later rabbinic literature, he pronounced that “every Jew should realize that the study and practice of spiritualism, or divination or whatever you may wish to call it is expressly forbidden by the Torah and by the sages of the Talmud”.⁷¹ Other sermons inveighing against spiritualism were delivered from the pulpit, such as an address given by Rabbi Israel Mattuck on “The Difference between Spiritualism and the Belief in Immortality” at the Liberal St. John’s Wood Road Synagogue in 1934.⁷²

Not all British rabbis, however, opposed the movement, and some even joined the ranks of Anglo-Jewish spiritualism. One such rabbi was Alec Eli Silverstone (1897–1982), the rabbi of the Orthodox Southport Synagogue and vice-president of the Mizrahi Federation of Great Britain.⁷³ Silverstone was ordained by the Manchester Yeshiva in 1918 and was subsequently awarded his doctorate in Semitic languages from Manchester University in 1924 for a dissertation on the biblical translations of Aquila and Onkelos.⁷⁴ He was involved for many years in spiritualist activity and served as an honorary vice-president of the JSPR; he also went on to address the Jewish Psychic Society, a postwar successor to the former organization.⁷⁵ In 1930 Silverstone advocated for spiritualism in the pages of the *Jewish Chronicle* in a lengthy essay that argued that the Halakhic prohibition of necromancy applied only to idolatrous modes of spirit communication, not the scientific approach of contemporary spiritualism. “There need, therefore”, he concluded, “be no undue qualms as to the permissibility of interesting oneself in the

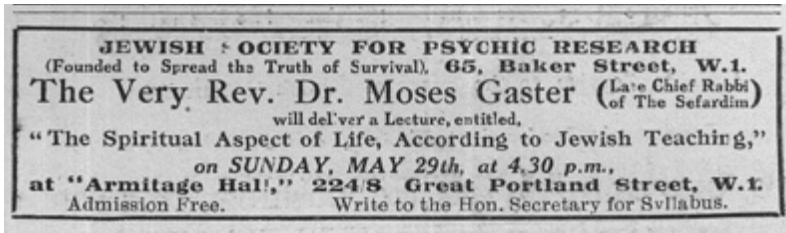
71 Revd. M. Bloch, “Spiritualism and the Jew”, *JC Supplement*, Aug. 1931, iii. For a response from the JSPR to Bloch’s allegation, see “Attitude of Judaism to Spiritualism”, *Light*, 11 Dec. 1931, 592.

72 “The Week’s Pulpit”, *JC*, 9 Feb. 1934, 9.

73 See William D. Rubinstein, Michael A. Jolles, and Hilary L. Rubinstein, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 915; John Cowell, *Philanthropy, Consensus, and Broiges: Managing a Jewish Community: A History of the Southport Jewish Community* (Southport: Cazneau Publishing, 2019).

74 Published as A. E. Silverstone, *Aquila and Onkelos* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931).

75 “Jewish Society for Psychological Research”, *Light*, 29 June 1934, 388; “Jewish Views on Spiritualism: Claims of Communication with Dead”, *JC*, 9 Dec. 1949, 8.



2 Advertisement for Moses Gaster's address to the Jewish Society for Psychic Research, from the *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 May 1932, page 14. Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

investigation of spiritualistic phenomena", a subject in need of "closer attention and more serious consideration".⁷⁶ Silverstone was further recorded as remarking that "it is only right" that "the Jew should go a step further than mere credulous belief, and seek to communicate with those who have passed on".⁷⁷

The most prominent British rabbi to come out in support of spiritualism was Moses Gaster (1856–1939), the eminent scholar of Jewish folklore. Gaster, who was born in Bucharest, studied in Germany at the Jewish seminary in Breslau (Wrocław) and received a doctorate from the University of Leipzig, before subsequently serving as lecturer of Romanian languages and literature at the University of Bucharest. He was expelled from Romania in 1885 on account of his Jewish nationalistic activities, at which point he came to England where he was quickly appointed the Haham (chief rabbi) of the Sephardic and Portuguese Congregation of London and served as the head of the rabbinic training seminar, the Lady Judith Montefiore College. Gaster was active in the Zionist movement, and the Balfour Declaration that granted the Jews a national home in Palestine was first drafted in his home, in February 1917.⁷⁸

Gaster had long maintained a scholarly interest in Kabbalah and Jewish magic and in the 1920s he began to forge connections with various esoteric organizations active in London, publishing articles in the journals of the

76 Rabbi Dr. A. E. Silverstone, "The Great Beyond", *JC Supplement*, Jan. 1930, i–iii, republished, with other related essays, in *The Great Beyond and Other Essays on Resurrection, Immortality, Spiritualism, and Cognate Matters* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, [1932]).

77 "Newsy Notes: Spiritualism and the Jews", *The Two Worlds*, 24 June 1932, 407.

78 See Simon Rabinovitch, "Jews, Englishmen, and Folklorists: The Scholarship of Joseph Jacobs and Moses Gaster", in *The Jew in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa*, ed. Eitan Bar-Yosef and Nadia Valman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 113–30; Maria Haralambakis, "Representations of Moses Gaster (1856–1939) in Anglophone and Romanian Scholarship", *New Europe College Yearbook* 13 (2013): 89–128.

Theosophical Society and the Quest Society.⁷⁹ He became friends at that time with the British Theosophist and independent scholar G. R. S. Mead (1863–1933), the founder of the Quest Society, with whom he exchanged a number of letters.⁸⁰ Most notably, Gaster’s son recalled in his memoirs that he “remember[ed] the regular visits of G. R. S. Mead, the Gnostic scholar, and how, towards the end of his life, he lumbered into psychic research and even inveigled my father into attending a couple of séances.”⁸¹ Mead died in September 1933, and it was indeed one year earlier that Gaster first became publicly involved with spiritualism, delivering a widely reported address to the JSPR on “The Spiritualist Aspect of Life, according to Jewish Teaching”.⁸² In his lecture, which was summarized in the Jewish press in both England and North America, as well as in several spiritualist periodicals, he proclaimed to the Anglo-Jewish spiritualists of the JSPR that “from the strictly Orthodox point of view . . . It was a wrong idea that their investigations were going beyond the traditional and proper sphere of Judaism”.⁸³ Barbanell (the editor of *Psychic News*) seized on the publicity surrounding Gaster’s address to increase Jewish readership of his newspaper, advertising its coverage of the lecture in the

79 See e.g. Moses Gaster, “A Gnostic Fragment from the Zohar,” *The Quest* 14 (1923): 452–69; Gaster, “Review of Books: The Mandaean ‘Treasure’. By Mark Lidzbarski”, *The Theosophical Review*, n.s., 2, no. 4 (April 1926): 222. The Quest Society was an esoteric society for the study of religion and philosophy founded in 1909 by G. R. S. Mead following his departure from the Theosophical Society (he had previously served as the private secretary of H. P. Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society); see Joscelyn Godwin, “Mead, George Robert Stowe”, in Hanegraaff, *Dictionary*, 785–6.

80 Discussed in Boaz Huss, “‘The Quest Universal’: Moses Gaster’s Interest in Kabbalah and Western Esotericism”, *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 40 (2018): 255–66; Huss, “Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah”, in *Occult Roots of Religious Studies*, ed. Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2021), 104–31.

81 Theodor Gaster, “Prolegomenon”, in Moses Gaster, *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Medieval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology*, 3 vols. (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1971), 1: xxxvii.

82 Reports on Gaster’s lecture include “Newsy Notes: Spiritualism and the Jews”; “Judaism on our Side: Mediumship admitted by Brave Rabbi”, *Psychic News*, 4 June 1932, 1, 3; “Jews and Spiritualism: Address by Haham Dr. Moses Gaster to Jewish Society for Psychic Research”, *JTA Bulletin*, 31 May 1932, 8–9; “Dr. Gaster al ha-spiritualismus”, *ha-Olam*, 2 June 1932, 333; “Judaism and Psychic Research: Address by Haham Dr. Gaster”, *JC*, 10 June, 1932, 14. Members of the JSPR had appealed to Gaster to address the society in 1929, suggesting that he appear on a panel with Sir Oliver Lodge; see Dora Blumenthal’s letters to Gaster, *Gaster Papers*, 12/477 and 47/177.

83 “Judaism and Psychic Research: Address by Haham Dr. Gaster”.



3 and 4 Two photographs of Moses Gaster at a 1932 séance held with the Jewish spirit photographer John Myers. In the right-hand photograph Gaster is obscured by “spirit extras” identified as the spirits of Benjamin Disraeli and the father of Dora E. Blumenthal. From Maurice Barbanell, *He walks in Two Worlds: The Story of John Myers Psychic Photographer, Healer and Philanthropist* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1964). Courtesy of the Widener Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Jewish Chronicle.⁸⁴ Recognizing the propaganda opportunity he had been handed, Barbanell heavily promoted Gaster’s endorsement of spiritualist investigation, running a headline in *Psychic News* that read “Judaism on our Side: Mediumship admitted by Brave Rabbi”.⁸⁵ But this was not all.

Less than two months later, the front page of *Psychic News* was dominated by the headline “Jewry’s Bravest Rabbi: Great Scholar vouches for a Spirit Photograph”.⁸⁶ Gaster, it transpired, had on 10 July 1932 held a séance in

84 See large advertisement for *Psychic News* with byline “Spiritualism and the Jews: Striking Address by the Very Rev. Dr. Moses Gaster”, *JC*, 3 June 1932, 29.

85 “Judaism on our Side”. Barbanell’s reports, undisguised attempts to promote spiritualism, are the sole source for much of Gaster’s spiritualist activities, necessitating a certain degree of caution on the part of scholars.

86 Maurice Barbanell, “Jewry’s Bravest Rabbi: Great Scholar vouches for a Spirit Photograph”, *Psychic News*, 23 July 1932, 1, 4.

his Maida Vale home with the up and coming Jewish medium and spirit photographer John Myers (who died in 1972). Myers, whose father-in-law was an Orthodox rabbi, gained fame in spiritualist circles that year for a series of spirit photographs he was alleged to have produced.⁸⁷ The séance was attested to in a letter – co-signed by Gaster and published in *Psychic News* – from the noted scholar of Jewish manuscripts Morris Lutzki (1895–1976), who was then working in Gaster’s library. Two cropped photographs from the séance, published in *Psychic News*, depict Gaster sitting in his sunroom; in the second photograph his face is obscured by two figures identified by those present as the spirits of Benjamin Disraeli and the father of Dora E. Blumenthal, the founder of the JSPR.⁸⁸

In an interview with Barbanell following the séance, Gaster is said to have expressed full confidence in the authenticity of Myers’s mediumship and granted permission to publish the latter’s spirit photograph of himself. While at pains to stress that he did not accept all the claims of spiritualism, he disclosed that he had “high regard for Mrs. Blumenthal”, with whom he said he often discussed spiritualism.⁸⁹ Blumenthal, he believed, “seemed to have reached a high level of psychic development, and to have a close touch with the spiritual world”. As for the biblical prohibition of communicating with the spirits of the dead, this, Gaster claimed, referred only to the use of dead bodies for magical rites. Reflecting on the significance of Gaster’s séance with Myers, Barbanell declared to the readers of *Psychic News* that “thousands of Jews, with their earnest, penetrating and enquiring minds, will soon start an examination of Spiritualism, helped by Dr. Gaster’s courageous statements”.⁹⁰

87 Myers’s life is treated in Maurice Barbanell, *He walks in Two Worlds: The Story of John Myers Psychic Photographer, Healer and Philanthropist* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1964). On the history of spirit photography, see Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 135–69.

88 “Jewry’s Bravest Rabbi”. High-quality uncropped reproductions of the photographs appear in Barbanell, *He walks in Two Worlds*, 64–5.

89 Blumenthal to Gaster, 15 Nov. 1929, Gaster Papers, 47/177, described a recent spirit photography séance held with a non-Jewish medium in which the image of Rashi appeared as a “spirit extra” on her photograph.

90 “Jewry’s Bravest Rabbi”; see also Maurice Barbanell, “Famous Rabbi who stood by Spirit Picture passes on”, *Psychic News*, 11 March 1939, 5. Another British rabbi (and associate of Gaster) who participated in spiritualist séances was the Kabbalist Zev Wolf Tannenbaum (1839–1927); in 1922 he published *Sefer mafte’ah ha-kabbalah* (The Key of the Kabbalah), an interpretation of Kabbalah in the light of modern science, which featured a lengthy approbation from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. His identification as a spiritualist is attested in Maurice Barbanell, “East End Jewry has a Remarkable Medium”, *Psychic News*,

Conclusion: between spiritualism and Judaism

“Have you noticed”, *Psychic News* posed to its readers in 1932, “that more and more Jews are enquiring into Spiritualism?”.⁹¹ If claims made elsewhere that year that there were hundreds of Jewish spiritualist circles active in England are surely exaggerated, there is no questioning that significant numbers of British Jews took up spiritualism in the interwar period.⁹² The various Jewish spiritualist societies established during these years are a testament to the efforts of Anglo-Jewish spiritualists to reconcile spiritualism with their Jewish identities and form institutions in which British Jews could, in the words of one Anglo-Jewish spiritualist, “investigate psychic phenomena and at the same time . . . retain both their Jewish faith and rationalism”.⁹³ The NJSS (alongside its successor societies) and the JSPR worked towards this aim in the two primary socio-economic spheres of London Jewry – the Yiddish-speaking immigrant communities of the East End, as well as the acculturated milieu of the well-established middle class residing in Central London and its suburbs. To these two groups one must add the many British Jews for whom spiritualism superseded their Jewish identities. Comfortable in the broader environment of British spiritualism, accounts of their paths from Judaism to spiritualism were often featured in the spiritualist press.⁹⁴

Anglo-Jewish spiritualists incorporated many Jewish elements into their spiritualist practice. A writer who visited a séance held by Ann Novak under the auspices of the London Jewish Spiritualist Society reported that those present “opened and closed the circle with prayers in Hebrew, and all the male sitters were expected to wear their hats during prayers”.⁹⁵ JSPR meetings often opened with recitals of the Mourner’s Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer uttered in honour of the deceased.⁹⁶ Beyond the

26 Nov. 1938, 3.

91 “All Worlds are One: Seeking the Truth”, *Psychic News*, 24 Sept. 1932, 6.

92 The marked increase in Jewish spiritualists was such that the journalist Hannan Swaffer, a prominent spiritualist, “humorously remarked” that “we shall soon have to form an anti-Semitic branch of the Spiritualist Movement”; “Newsy Notes: Spiritualism and the Jews”.

93 “Form Jewish Society for Psychic Research”; “Jewish Society for Psychic Research: ‘Judaism and Super-Normal Phenomena’”, *JC*, 23 Jan. 1931, 30.

94 E.g., “‘I have found a Rational Religion at last’: Jew–Agnostic–Spiritualist”, *Psychic News*, 5 Nov. 1932, 2.

95 “Spiritualism among the Jews”.

96 “Jewish Investigation”, *The Two Worlds*, 16 May 1930, 311; “Jewish Society for Psychical Research”, *Light*, 27 Nov. 1931, 567.

inclusion of Jewish ritual, many Anglo-Jewish spiritualists, as we have seen, sought in spiritualism a path towards Jewish religious renewal. The NJSS advocated for spiritualism among the Jews of the East End in order, in part, that they “derive a truer and better conception of their Judaic belief” as the “Spiritualistic teaching will help to bind them more spiritually to their wonderful faith”.⁹⁷ Similar sentiments were expressed by the founding members of the JSPR, who hoped that their pursuit of spiritualism and psychical research would, in the words addressed to them by Conan Doyle, “make religion a living thing”. In this, their aims closely resembled those of the Jewish Theosophists (many of whom were also part of the JSPR) and other interwar Jewish members of esoteric movements.⁹⁸

Much like British spiritualism as a whole, Anglo-Jewish spiritualism declined rapidly with the outbreak of the Second World War and failed to firmly re-establish itself in the postwar era.⁹⁹ The history of interwar Anglo-Jewish spiritualism speaks to the broader moment in which British Jewry found itself in the years prior to 1939. At a crossroads between tradition and modernity, the Jews of England were rapidly acculturating into British society at a time when spiritualism achieved widespread popularity. To take up spiritualism, then, was in many ways an expression of anglicization. As religious observance declined, spiritualism offered sceptical Jews a modern formulation of traditional beliefs about the soul and afterlife. By adopting Judaism to spiritualism, moreover, Anglo-Jewish spiritualists hoped to revitalize what many saw as an increasingly moribund Jewish religious life. Although many in the Jewish community criticized the turn towards spiritualism, Anglo-Jewish spiritualists rejected any notion that spiritualism was incompatible with Judaism, arguing, instead, that “no religion could be more spiritual than ours”.

97 “Jews and Spiritualism”.

98 Huss, “To Study Judaism”.

99 Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, 162–72. One postwar Anglo-Jewish spiritualist society, the Jewish Psychic Society, operated from 1949 until at least 1954. An account of postwar Anglo-Jewish spiritualism, as well as the more localized histories of interwar Anglo-Jewish spiritualist activity outside London, remain a desideratum.