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Review:

Chief Rabbi Hertz: The Wars of the Lord, Derek Taylor

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*Chief Rabbi Hertz: The Wars of the Lord*, Derek Taylor (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2014), ISBN 978-0-85303-918-1, pp. xx + 297, £50.

The image offered by Derek Taylor in this study of the life of Chief Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz builds on a recurring motif of his role as a fearless and forceful battler fighting, in a remarkably self-confident manner, to defend Orthodox Judaism in the varied settings in which he found himself. The challenge in South Africa, and even more so in Britain, of asserting authority against a lay leadership that sought to marginalize religious concerns by ensuring that power rested in its hands, is presented as an abiding problem that Hertz unfailingly attempted to overcome. Taylor acknowledges how within the parameters of Orthodoxy, notwithstanding the dismay this caused to those on his religious right wing, Hertz did not feel compelled to focus on the specifics of religious observance provided there was a principled willingness to identify with and uphold the values of an Orthodox Judaism. In this sense, though driven by a concern to defend Orthodoxy, he did not perceive the need to emphasize a religious exclusivity. It was this approach that helped strengthen him on his path towards maintaining the dominance of Orthodox Judaism during his tenure as chief rabbi in Britain. This was achieved during a period of immense change in British Jewry. Hertz oversaw the mostly successful integration into mainstream Orthodoxy of the vast numbers of Eastern European immigrants who had arrived during the chief rabbinate of his predecessor, a period in which the demographic makeup of the community had been transformed. Simultaneously, he had to provide religious leadership to British Jewry as it experienced two world wars with all the political problems which that entailed, including the arrival of a new set of immigrants escaping Nazi persecution.

Taylor details a number of the difficulties Hertz sought to overcome in his effort to maintain religious observance under conditions of war, and his battles with the Honorary Officers of the United Synagogue receive notable attention. Indeed, the central challenge Hertz faced in his struggles with Sir Robert Waley Cohen functions as the heart of Taylor's account of the chief rabbi's life story. It is in this sense that, as the title of his work suggests, Taylor builds up a picture of Hertz as a somewhat lonely

defender of religion. Taylor relates how Hertz, buttressed by a strong belief in his religious message, refused to take a backward step against the unremitting efforts of one of British Jewry's aristocratic "cousinhood" to impose lay control over the religious life of the community.

Given his focus on the religious role played by Hertz, Taylor's account of the theology of both the chief rabbi and of Waley Cohen as his arch-opponent appears somewhat limited at times. He makes use of a reasonably broad range of sources to detail Hertz's activities. In this, as is acknowledged, he appears to have been ably guided by Jeremy Schonfield, a grandson of Hertz, whose sharing of his family album and various other material helped Taylor uncover some valuable personal history. Yet when it comes to the religious ideas of both men, Taylor's understanding appears to be built on less firm foundations. Most notable here is the absence of any discussion of Hertz's distinctive theology of "Progressive Conservative Judaism". This term is entirely missing from this work, a lamentable lacuna even in a work designed primarily as a popular study. Addressing the battles that occurred between Hertz and Waley Cohen over control in religious training of ministers, a consideration of the content of Hertz's arguments on this topic would have been welcome. Instead, focus rests on the personality clash between these two figures. In Taylor's account of Waley Cohen's religious position he writes that "Waley Cohen labelled his ideas as a 'Spiritist' approach to Judaism" (112). This is in fact the term I introduced in my own assessment of Waley Cohen's approach (*Freud-Kandel, Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913: An Ideology Forsaken*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006) and it would be something of a struggle to suggest that Waley Cohen thought about the nature of the Jewish theology he sought to promote in opposition to the chief rabbi's Orthodoxy, in a sufficiently serious manner to have developed a term of his own to characterize it. What Taylor rightly seeks to emphasize, however, is the manner in which Waley Cohen's belief in his right, built as much on a classic British class consciousness as anything else, drove him to attempt to undermine the chief rabbi in countless arenas. Hertz insisted on upholding the understanding of his role as it had been outlined by the United Synagogue President at the time of his induction, Nathaniel Rothschild: that the chief rabbi was to exert control over the religious life of the community. Waley Cohen, from the time he joined the Honorary Officers of the United Synagogue until he eventually became President himself, consistently sought to redefine these parameters.

Taylor's study of the life, thought, and work of Joseph Herman Hertz

does not purport to offer a scholarly account of this remarkable chief rabbi. Rather, as a work produced by a lay historian as a popular biographical study, it has the happy knack of including humorous anecdotal material that helps illustrate the particular picture it seeks to draw. He notes, for example, the regret of the Johannesburg Hebrew congregation that, while honoured by President Kruger being present to open their synagogue, he refrained from covering his head (p. 15). Taylor also makes a fair assessment of British Jewry regarding their awareness “that they were incompetent to understand the theological arguments for change, and felt safer relying on the Chief Rabbi to lay down the law” (p. 54). Yet Taylor’s central claim, supported in the foreword written by the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, that Hertz played a crucial role in securing the dominance of the United Synagogue in British Jewry, rather ignores its notably diminishing numbers in more recent times. Moreover, while religious leaders may wish that they could exert the influence Taylor ascribes to Hertz, the evidence to support this claim remains unclear. More than anything else, the model of the United Synagogue appears to point to the prioritization of sociology over theology in determining religious affiliation. It was in Hertz’s battle against Waley Cohen to ensure that the institutional theology of the United Synagogue remained thoroughly Orthodox that he made a most notable contribution, and Taylor’s work certainly helps to highlight his role in this sphere. Taylor’s study offers an accessible, thoroughly readable account, which brings together a host of information and covers a critical period in the development of British Jewry. His analysis of the role played by Hertz in supporting Zionist efforts in Britain is also important here. This was an area in which, once again, the chief rabbi was forced to battle against many in the lay leadership of British Jewry who were embarrassed by what they perceived as a challenge to the patriotic values they wished to promote. In drawing attention to the contributions of Chief Rabbi Hertz it is hoped that Taylor has demonstrated the importance of appreciating how much more there was to this religious leader than the so-called Hertz Chumash with which he is most popularly associated.

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