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Book review:

The Federation of Synagogues: A New History, Geoffrey Alderman

Anne J. Kershen^{1,*}

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* Correspondence: a.kershen@qmul.ac.uk

¹ Queen Mary, University of London, UK

The Federation of Synagogues: A New History, Geoffrey Alderman
(London: Federation of Synagogues, 2018), ISBN 978-0-993-
46703-5, pp. 210, £8.99.

In 1987, the Federation of Synagogues celebrated its centenary. The occasion was marked by the publication of Geoffrey Alderman's history of the organization, *The Federation of Synagogues 1887–1987*. Thirty years on, he has updated the history and, in so doing, has, as he explains, "revised some of the judgements". In true Alderman style the new version is presented with "warts and all". There is no hiding of the misdemeanours of those who were in charge of the Federation over the past 130 years. Nor is the unsympathetic behaviour of some members of the British Jewish community towards their co-religious new immigrant arrivals overlooked. Their concerns resulted from the negative image presented – as they saw it – by the increasing number of Eastern European Jews crowding into the East End of London towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The story of the Federation of Synagogues is not simply one of its rise, expansion, and contraction. It is interwoven with the history of the "Jewish East End" and reflects the lives of the immigrants who worked and lived there, their gradual integration into mainstream society, and the effect of their departure from "the ghetto" into the suburbs in the years following the Second World War. The origin of the Federation of Synagogues lies in the rejection by East End immigrant Jews of the "cathedral-like" Orthodox synagogues established and run by prominent Ashkenazi members of British (essentially London) Jewry. In 1870, these synagogues were amalgamated by an Act of Parliament into the United Synagogue, with Lord Rothschild as its president and Nathan Adler – who took the title of Chief Rabbi of Britain – as its spiritual leader. East End Jews were not prepared to accept the control of the United Synagogue or Adler as their Chief Rabbi. As Alderman explains, the new arrivals found the existing Orthodox synagogues "woefully deficient and totally at odds with what they had been familiar with in Eastern Europe", and so they founded their own *chevras*. These were small-scale places of worship where immigrants who originated from the same town, village, and/or trades could gather. A further deterrent to an alliance with the United Synagogue was its high cost of membership, which traditionally covered funeral costs. As Alderman points out, the need for burial benefits was one of the stimuli behind the creation of the Federation.

Although the large-scale migration of Jews from Eastern Europe took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a number of “minor” synagogues had been founded much earlier, three of which dated back to the eighteenth century. However, as the numbers of both *chevras* and immigrants grew, it became obvious that some form of organization was needed to control, co-ordinate, and create an image more acceptable to the critics of Eastern European Jewry. Alderman charts in detail the events leading to the founding of the Federation and the choice of its first President, Samuel Montagu, who was the Liberal MP for Whitechapel. He strongly disputes the view that Montagu sought this position for purposes of self-preferment. Instead, he paints the picture of a generous benefactor concerned to provide benefit for those who lived and worked in his constituency. By 1903, the Federation was composed of thirty-nine small congregations, rising to sixty-eight in 1937; by 1911 its membership exceeded that of the United Synagogue.

However, this book is not just a survey of the rise and decline of numbers and locations of congregations: it is very much a detailed study of those who ran the Federation and in recounting their histories, Alderman reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the leadership. We learn that Samuel Montagu’s place as President was taken by his son Louis. As unenthusiastic about the Federation as his father had been supportive, he was a man who, in Alderman’s eyes, was “indiscrete” in pronouncing his belief that Russian Jews in Britain were “emissaries of Bolshevism”. Louis Montagu resigned his presidency of the Board in 1925, as did its secretary, Joseph Blank, who essentially ran the Federation as his fiefdom until his departure to Monte Carlo that same year, following investigations into the Federation’s finances.

From 1928 until 1944, Morris Davis, the one-time leader of Stepney Council, served as President of the Federation. Davis recognized the need to accommodate those who were moving beyond the confines of the East End and led the expansion of the Federation beyond its original boundaries. Alderman refers to Davis’s, as he sees it, “extraordinary” presidency as a virtual “dictatorship”. It came to an end when Davis committed a “serious criminal offence” which had nothing to do with the Federation but for which he served six months in prison. Usually happy to provide impressive detail of the affairs of the Federation, Alderman does not reveal the nature of Davis’s transgression; he just tells us that years later the man died as a lonely recluse.

Yet another president of the Federation, Morris Lederman, ended his career under a cloud. By the time of his retirement in 1989, he had taken the Federation from the difficult postwar years – he became President in 1951 – to a more settled and expansive status and, in so doing, reversed what Alderman suggests was a period of terminal decline. He was clearly a controversial figure, described by the author as cunning, street-wise, ruthless, and oligarchic. Although he had served the Federation well, following his retirement it was discovered that Lederman had engaged in certain deeds of “financial mismanagement”, which benefited himself and his family.

In spite of its occasionally troublesome past, the Federation has survived and modernized, moving its headquarters out of the East End to North-West London, where a large percentage of its members now live. Currently, the number of constituent synagogues stands at eighteen with seven affiliates. Lessons have been learnt from the problems with the autocratic presidents and secretaries of the past, and Alderman now describes it as “an ‘empowering entity’ . . . delivering a genuinely ‘federal’ system that puts the individual community first” (p. 205).

In his preface to the book, Geoffrey Alderman expresses his hope that he has “written something of interest to the members of the Federation (of which I am one) but also to the wider Jewish and non-Jewish audiences” (p. 8). The monograph may well appeal to a wider readership but they may wish, as this reviewer did, that the author had provided references, or at least a list of sources and their locations, including, of course, the Federation’s own archives.

Anne J. Kershen