

Jewish Historical Studies
A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry

Review

Book review: *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology*, by Miri Freud-Kandel

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How to cite: Goodman, D. R. 'Book review: *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology*, by Miri Freud-Kandel'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2024, 56(1), pp. 194–196.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2025v56.14>.

Published: 9 April 2025

Peer review:

This article has been through editorial review.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2025v56.14>.

Open access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

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Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology,
Miri Freud-Kandel (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023),
ISBN 978-1-835533-90-1, 422 pp., £40.

“Why don’t the Orthodox ever talk about God?”, Rabbi Neil Gillman would ask me when we would meet in his office at the Jewish Theological Seminary to discuss theology. “I don’t know”, I would respond. “But I think we should be talking about Him.” One Orthodox Jew who was unafraid to talk about God – and who suffered the consequences for being too open in his theological questioning for his community’s tastes – was Louis Jacobs (1920–2006). The English rabbi and scholar founded the New London Synagogue and was instrumental in helping the Masorti movement gain a foothold in the United Kingdom. Jacobs and his desire for more expansiveness in Jewish doctrine – a desire which was blunted by the rabbinic establishment of his era but which may be more welcome in ours – is the subject of Miri Freud-Kandel’s intriguing new book.

Louis Jacobs was a significant, controversial, and – as Freud-Kandel argues – increasingly relevant theologian whose thought deserves to be examined in greater depth. Freud-Kandel supplies us with the first book-length study of Jacobs’s theology.

What makes Jacobs’s approach to Judaism valuable, in Freud-Kandel’s view, is that he was unafraid to ask questions (a Jewish theological version of *de omnibus dubitandum* [doubt everything], if you will), and that he was unafraid to follow his line of questioning to wherever it took him. Additionally, he was willing to pursue these lines of questioning in a personal manner – hence the “quest” motif. Furthermore, he steadfastly believed that the tools that he (or anyone else) needed in order to pursue this quest were to be found in the traditional sources of Jewish theology. In this sense, one need not be an intellectual or an elite, academically trained thinker to embark on this quest. Instead, a sense of curiosity, a willingness to search, and access to a decent Jewish library was sufficient.

In addition to elucidating Jacobs’s questing (and questioning) theology, Freud-Kandel presents his theological approach as a model for those interested in undertaking their own personal theological quests. Here she offers Jacobs as an alternative to Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mordecai Kaplan, or Joseph Soloveitchik, and Jonathan Sacks. Freud-Kandel does address this “why Jacobs? And why not the others?” question, making the case for Jacobs’s approach as not only distinctive but potentially even more

useful than those of his other Jewish theological contemporaries. At the same time, she does not shy away from critiquing Jacobs when she feels that his approach comes up short. She also sketches out the contours of what she terms “post-secular Jacobite theology.” (Freud-Kandel defines post-secularism as a conception of religion that “highlights the limits of rationalist thought and reclaims a space for religion”.)

Although Jacobs, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, was voted the most influential British Jew in a 2005 *Jewish Chronicle* poll, his enduring influence, Freud-Kandel tells us, might be more in doubt given the increasing prominence of Sacks’s thought and presence in British Jewish life (and in global Jewish life more broadly). Sacks has overshadowed Jacobs and has taken over the place that Jacobs once occupied. Freud-Kandel queries why this is so, given the similarities between the two of them on many theological issues, and acknowledges that another study would be needed to address this question. While Sacks was no stranger to theological controversy – the first edition of his *Dignity of Difference* (2002) provoked a “Sacks Affair” – he crucially never entirely lost the support of centrist and centre-right Orthodoxy, because (at least in my reading of his thought) he never questioned the unitary divine composition of the Torah. While Orthodoxy can tolerate questioning of certain principles, and can tolerate this interrogation up to certain points – for example, on subjects such as evolution, the age of the universe, and other science-and-Torah matters – the one fundamental principle at which it draws the line is the belief that Moses received the entire Torah as we have it today. Jacobs challenged this and in the process lost the support of mainstream Orthodoxy. Sacks, by contrast, did not compromise on this credo, and thus was not written out by Orthodoxy. Additionally, Jacobs’s writing style can be a bit too dense for lay readers, something which, in my judgment, has caused his writings to be found far less frequently in contemporary Jewish bookshelves, in contrast to Sacks’s clear, eminently readable prose. That it is not uncommon to hear Sacks being quoted in Conservative and even Reform synagogues testifies to the success of his literary artistry, albeit not necessarily of his theology. Freud-Kandel’s juxtaposing of Jacobs with Sacks, and the questions she raises about them, are thus important as well, because it spurs us to realize that Jewish theologians who wish their ideas to have greater purchase should ensure not only that their ideas are inspiring but also that the manner by which they transmit them is captivating.

Two generations ago, Louis Jacobs’s struggles with Orthodox dogma,

and particularly his suggestion that the theory of the composition of the Torah was no longer in dispute, led to the “Jacobs Affair” and his subsequent ostracism from the English Orthodox community. As I alluded to earlier, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was forced to retract the original version of his *Dignity of Difference* because it appeared to question the doctrine of Jewish choseness. These episodes bespeak a continuing reluctance on the part of Orthodox Judaism to confront challenges to belief in an open and intellectually confident manner. I doubt that this approach to theology can last – and, if it does, Orthodoxy may experience a brain drain as those unsatisfied with this approach leave for settings more tolerant of dissent when it comes to matters of belief. The other possibility is for a grassroots groundswell within Orthodoxy to develop wherein thinking Orthodox Jews who want to hold on to traditional Jewish theology without sacrificing their intellectual integrity will gradually begin accepting a version of biblical authorship along the lines of those that have been suggested by scholars such as Norman Solomon and Marc Zvi Brettler. Over time this understanding of Torah MiSinai (that the Torah was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai) might become sufficiently prevalent to allow it to attain the status of normativity (similar to what has happened in the past twenty to thirty years with the women’s movement in Orthodoxy). We are still a long way from getting there, but Freud-Kandel’s invaluable study of Jacobs and his quest to harmonize undaunted questioning with sincere belief shows us how we might eventually arrive at that destination.

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