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Review:

Chief Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler: The Forgotten Founder, Derek Taylor
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Chief Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler: *The Forgotten Founder*, Derek Taylor (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2018), ISBN 978-1-910-38367-4, pp. 272, £40.

Nathan Marcus Adler (1803–1890) served as chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi Jewish communities of the British Empire from his election to that post, in 1845, until his death. Born in Hanover (then linked to the United Kingdom through the person of the monarch, George III), Adler was the *Landesrabbiner* (that is, the government-appointed chief rabbi) of Hanover at the time of this election.

Adler was not merely the first British chief rabbi to boast a university education and the first to undertake regular pastoral “visitations” of congregations under his ecclesiastical authority. In contrast to his predecessors in London, he was a rabbinical scholar of international repute, famous for his work *Netinah laGer*, a study, published in 1875, of the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the *Targum Onkelos*.

Given that his was the first election to the office of chief rabbi in which, alongside the major Ashkenazi congregations in London, no fewer than twenty-one provincial communities participated, Adler was able to claim a much greater measure of allegiance than his predecessors at the Great Synagogue in Duke’s Place in Aldgate. A survey of these congregations, which he initiated shortly after his induction, revealed a series of Anglo-Jewish communities in which observance of orthodox practice was lax, synagogue attendance poor, and the educational facilities were sadly deficient. These revelations reinforced his assumption that the orthodox structure in Britain was far too weak to permit the encouragement of the sort of self-governing communities which existed on the continent, and that a strong centralized religious infrastructure, naturally under his control, was needed.

So it was that “Adlerism” was born. In 1847, Adler published his *Laws and Regulations for all the Synagogues in the United Kingdom*. The powers to which he laid claim – to be able to superintend religious observances in the synagogues and even to sanction the building of new synagogues and the formation of new congregations – appeared extravagant. But he was able to enforce them through a wide variety of devices, not least his position as Ashkenazi ecclesiastical authority of the Board of Deputies, and the consequent recognition he was able to secure from the provincial

communities, whose religious functionaries had in practice to be licensed by him. He campaigned ceaselessly for more Jewish day schools and for the funds with which to build them. He founded Jews' College. And it is clear that, behind the scenes, he played a key role in the decision (endorsed by a private Act of Parliament in 1870) to merge the major Ashkenazi synagogues of London into what became known as the United Synagogue.

In many of his endeavours, Adler unashamedly sought out – and invariably obtained – the enthusiastic assistance of Moses Montefiore, the president of the Board of Deputies for much of the mid-nineteenth century and lay leader of the Sephardim in Britain. The meeting of minds between Adler, the learned rabbinical cleric, and Montefiore, the mega-wealthy *baal teshuvah* and returnee to the observance of orthodoxy, was a strange but exceedingly strong one.

A definitive biography of Adler is long overdue. But the volume published under the authorship of Derek Taylor certainly does not fill this gap. To begin with, Taylor's volume contains some astonishing factual errors. It is simply untrue, for example, that Adler was "the sole spiritual authority" of the Board of Deputies (p. 179). The Board had – and still has – two such authorities, the chief rabbi of the [Ashkenazi] United Hebrew Congregations and the Haham or designated ecclesiastical head of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation.

Nor is it true that "in 1836, the Marriage Registration Act had qualified the Board of Deputies to approve marriages" (p. 136). What is true is that the Registration Act of 1836 (section 30) recognized the President of the Board of Deputies as the sole authority competent to certify to the Registrar General the names of the synagogues' marriage secretaries, thus enabling couples to combine the religious marriage ceremony with the new civil registration requirement. Under the leadership of Montefiore, it was established that such certification would not be given without authorization from one of the Board's two ecclesiastical authorities. This meant, in short, that Adler, like his predecessor Solomon Hirschell, could exercise a practical veto over the recognition (and, therefore, establishment) of all new Ashkenazi congregations throughout the British Empire. It was a power that Adler ruthlessly exercised. I should add that elsewhere (p. 100) Taylor appears to confuse the Registration Act of 1836 with Lord Lyndhurst's Marriage Act of 1835, which addressed the vexed questions of "the prohibited degrees of consanguinity" and, therefore, of marriage between a husband and his deceased wife's sister and between an uncle and his niece.

Then I must draw attention to Taylor's inadequate referencing of his sources. I refer not merely to the citation of monographs and newspapers without giving page numbers (an established hallmark of the Taylor *genre*). What, for example, is one to make of a reference to "Jewish Chronicle July 1848" (p. 106)? Or to "Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry*" (p. 121)? Or to "Hansard" (p. 136)? Taylor has now extended this artistry to the referencing of entire archive collections. At one point, he describes the weather ("a sweltering day") on the occasion of the funeral of Adler's first wife Henrietta in 1853 and gives the reference simply as "Meteorological Office archive department" (p. 136).

I have commented elsewhere on Taylor's offhand writing style. In the present volume, he alludes – rightly – to Adler's failure to hold fund-raising dinners for the Jews' College he created, and opines that "It can only be assumed that they [fund-raising dinners] were considered *infra dig* by the good and the great who served on the College Council" (p. 98). It appears not to have occurred to Taylor that Adler himself might have considered such dinners "*infra dig*".

Nathan Marcus Adler was a great if arrogant rabbinical leader and a consummate if overly sanctimonious communal politician. Many of the communal structures that still serve British Jewry owe their foundation to his endeavours. He deserves better than the slapdash treatment Derek Taylor has meted out.

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