

## Jewish Historical Studies

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### Review:

*A Rocky Road: Memoirs, Abraham Levy with Simon Rocker*  
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*A Rocky Road: Memoirs, Abraham Levy with Simon Rocker* (London: Halban, 2017), ISBN 978-1-905-55981-7, pp. 304, £20.00.

The Spanish and Portuguese (Sephardi) community is both the oldest and the most heterogeneous of the Jewish communities in the UK. The founders of the community – officially the first Jews to inhabit these islands since the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 – arrived here in the middle of the seventeenth century. They were the aristocrats of the Jewish world and their pride in their ancestry was legendary. Assuring George III of their loyalty on the occasion of his accession to the throne in 1760, 250 years after the Jews had been expelled from Portugal and more than a century after they had begun to settle in Britain, they still proudly referred to themselves as the nation of Portuguese Jews. The Committee (later Board) of Deputies established that year conducted its first meetings in Portuguese. Indeed, the very term “Board of Deputies” was chosen because it corresponded to its forerunner, the Sephardi committee of *deputados*.

It is this community which is the setting for Rabbi Levy’s memoirs. Born into a prominent family in the heart of the community in Gibraltar – a small but extremely active outpost of the Sephardi world – Rabbi Levy’s rise to the position of senior rabbi of the community was anything but rocky. The title presumably refers to his Gibraltarian background rather than any difficulties along the way. His background was comfortable, with a long tradition of communal service in his family. His parents sent him to Carmel College, a public school that aimed to turn out alumni who would be both observant Jews and British gentlemen; at home in equal measure in a synagogue and on the cricket pitch of a gentleman’s club. He then went through the standard institutions to prepare him for the rabbinate and, more specifically, for London’s main Sephardi synagogue in Maida Vale.

The book offers an entertaining account of his encounters with the great and the good and his pastoral activities. Although not nearly as tumultuous as the period which preceded it, the half century or so of Rabbi Levy’s service saw remarkable changes in the Anglo-Jewish community in general and the Sephardi community in particular. When he set out, rabbis were usually “reverends” who dressed like English clergymen of the

Jewish faith. Some of them even wore dog collars. Their lay leaders wore top hats and pinstriped suits and their services were choral. If the Church of England was the Tory Party at prayer, then the United Synagogue and the Sephardim filled that function for the upper classes of the Mosaic persuasion.

By the time Levy retired, the formality and deference which had characterized the Jewish community had largely vanished though it did still hold sway to some extent in the Sephardi community. The old Spanish and Portuguese families had been swamped by new arrivals from all over the Sephardi diaspora, from Morocco, the Levant, and particularly from Iraq. On the one hand, the descendants of the old families who had led Anglo-Jewry for centuries found the pull of assimilation in a prosperous and increasingly multicultural society too attractive and were lost to the community. On the other hand, those Jews wanting to return to the tradition found the customs and attitudes of the old community too dated and formal and reverted to the stricter, more orthodox modes of the growing right wing of the Ashkenazi community. Rabbi Levy's work in reaching out to less committed members of his community and to outsiders was outstanding. Yet many of his protégés eventually ceased to regard him as their mentor. He eventually found himself, in his own words, in the squeezed middle.

Some of Levy's judgments seem debatable. He claims, for instance, that, along with the silk hats and fancy robes that once characterized the community, it has also lost its ability to straddle both the Jewish and secular worlds. He puts his commitment to ensuring that his pupils, as well as being steeped in the religious sources, also received a reasonable secular education down to his Sephardi background. The Sephardim, he suggests, never entered a ghetto, whether physical or spiritual. Yet his stance is probably owed at least in equal measure to good old-fashioned English pragmatism and distrust of ideology. The modern Sephardi rabbinate, particularly in Israel, has shown itself every bit as capable of extremism as its Ashkenazi counterpart.

Levy places considerable emphasis on his endeavours to bridge the gaping chasm between Haredim and Progressives. Given that his proposals to this effect were not always acceptable to a community squeezed between an ultra-orthodox element growing in numbers, confidence, and extremism, on the one hand, and an increasingly assertive Progressive community, on the other, he seems to overestimate

the success of these endeavours, though he doubtless did contribute to making the Sephardi community more open and inclusive than some of the forms of Orthodoxy currently in vogue.

*Vivian Wineman*