IN MEMORIAM: RABBI DR LOUIS JACOBS

LOUIS JACOBS: OUR RABBI AND TEACHER

*Jonathan Wittenberg**

When the great, righteous man of his generation leaves his place, its beauty and radiance are gone.

The shock and sorrow of Rabbi Jacobs's passing bring with them the great sadness of the end of an era. As my colleague Rabbi Chaim Weiner said, we could always feel Rabbi Jacobs was there before us, or stood behind us, with his immense knowledge and authority. He made us safe, as a parent makes a child feel safe. Now he's departed from us, and with him are gone his learning, teaching, wisdom and his humour, his great tolerance and his impassioned integrity.

Rabbi Jacobs was an *illui*, a prodigy, and a *gaon*, a master and a genius. With an immeasurable knowledge, a legendary memory, a capacity for explaining the complex simply and for quoting the recondite as if everyone knew it, with an inexhaustible creativity in writing and speaking, he was the outstanding scholar and teacher of at least three generations of students, congregants and colleagues. His books, covering in some forty volumes almost every sphere of rabbinic scholarship, will make him the teacher of many generations to come. With an utter commitment to the truth, he was unbending in his integrity and no amount of communal politics, or condemnation or branding, could deter him from the quest. He was a follower of Torah and truth and they could not be apart from each other. He was a passionate fighter for what he believed. Yet he was open to unknowing, to what the road ahead, the honest quest, would bring. This is what loving God with all his being meant to Rabbi Jacobs.

Rabbi Jacobs was a wonderful family man. He was a great father. Naomi told me of how he would always read – read and watch the television, yet miss out on neither; read at meals (in which only she would accompany him); I think I once heard that he even read while shaving. The children grew up believing that every house had on its shelves a second

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row of books stacked behind the books in the front. There was much laughter and joy in the family, with holidays in Wales climbing Snowdon (whether or not the children liked it), and great conversation. Though once, outdone by Shula in this art, Rabbi Jacobs apparently said ‘I’m no match for this’ and walked out of the room. The grandchildren adored their *zeida* and felt they could ask him anything, the greatest compliment to a grandparent. He was a guru to them and was loved by their friends.

Everyone who knew him will also testify that Rabbi Jacobs was a person of great humility. Recently, he gave his library to the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. The librarians Dr Piet van Boxall and Dr Joanna Weinberg, both of whom loved Rabbi Jacobs and were with him when the volumes were taken away, told me of the grace and generosity of spirit with which he parted from his beloved books.

Nobody realised, even two weeks ago, how near the end was. In his last days, Rabbi Jacobs spoke calmly of the world to come and no doubt wanted to rejoin Shula, his wife of 61 years, who died last November.

Rabbi Jacobs was a Manchester boy. His father’s parents came from Telz in Lithuania, a town whose yeshivah was to fascinate him throughout his life. His mother’s family came from Mitau, near Riga, in Latvia. His father was proud to be a working man, though voting Liberal not Labour – he really did know Lloyd George.¹ Like his father, his mother was a person of great faith. Louis was their only child, and, as he himself puts it, he didn’t escape being spoiled. His first school was St John’s; in later life he liked to make a link with the location of his beloved New London Synagogue in St John’s Wood. It’s disarming to know that as a child Louis did indeed have other loves than Judaism. He loved cricket and was a skilled wicket-keeper; maybe this is the secret of how he always had the ability to stump others with his learning without being stumped himself.

His love of Jewish study really began with his attendance at Reb Yonah Balkind’s cheder; Rebbe Balkind was ‘beyond doubt the most naturally gifted pedagogue I have ever met’.² He ran this institution with selfless devotion for over sixty years. He was to Rabbi Jacobs the model of what *Torah lishemah*, Torah for its own sake, meant and he always saw him as his teacher par excellence. He had a gift for engaging the imagination of his pupils; when they studied the portion in Exodus dealing with an ox falling into a pit, out the class would go to dig the hole, while one of them had to pretend to be the ox.

Soon after his barmitzvah, Rabbi Jacobs went on to the Manchester Yeshivah, where he studied for seven years. (Only yesterday someone told me that Louis would come to eat at her parents’ house, presumably as part

of the well established system of *Esstage* by which *yeshivah bachurim* have been supported the world over. But Louis is also remembered with special fondness in the Manchester community.) He admired the rosh yeshivah, Rabbi Segal, with whom he was later to study for *semichah*, and held him in awe. It was only the Musar traditions, imported from the Navardock Yeshivah where the rosh had studied, which he found uncongenial. What worked in Navardock, I heard Rabbi Jacobs say, wasn't necessarily helpful in the 'vastly different spiritual climate of Manchester'.³ He enjoyed the Musar sessions not one bit more at the Gateshead Kolel years later. Perhaps it's also due to such experiences that Rabbi Jacobs himself was so careful to avoid the note of admonition. He always took scrupulous care never to shame or humiliate anyone.

The teacher he loved most was Rabbi Dubov (Rabbi Jacobs had a picture of him outside his study); Rabbi Dubov was 'jovial and always in a good mood, as a true Hasid should be', and 'Certainly it was the Hasidic, mystical approach of Rabbi Dubov that saved the students for the religious life of Judaism.'⁴ It shouldn't be forgotten that alongside the huge corpus of Rabbi Jacobs's writings on theology and Talmud are several wonderful volumes on Hasidism.

This world of Torah, of the ways of the Lithuanian *yeshivah*, of learning Gemara in Yiddish, of listening to the great *maggidim* preach whenever they visited Manchester, of singing in the choir, was Rabbi Jacobs's world. Only a year and a half ago, in a 'conversation' to celebrate the New North London Synagogue's thirtieth anniversary, I asked him about the great influences on him in his youth. It became clear to me then that, for all his engagement in scholarship and in the critical-historical method, Rabbi Jacobs had never entirely wanted to leave the world of the *yeshivah*, nor, for all his love of England and Anglo-Jewry, did it ever leave him. This world was his alma mater and he loved it and carried it with him.

I also asked him recently who were his heroes and role models in Jewish learning. He answered at once, 'The Ragadshover Gaon', Rabbi Joseph Rozin of Dvinsk, 'who knew the whole of rabbinic literature by heart and of whom Bialik once said that from one Ragadshover two Einsteins could be carved'.⁵ He also loved the challenging and debating spirit of the Gaon, and was, throughout his own life, to relish genuine argument so long as it was conducted 'for the sake of Heaven' with a commitment to the quest for truth and with integrity.

Only the war prevented Rabbi Jacobs from travelling to Telz to learn in its great yeshivah. He admired the *derech*, the way of learning of that famed institution, and his paternal grandparents had come from the town. He had already paid the necessary visit to the Lithuanian Consulate in

Manchester when war broke out. Thank God, Rabbi Jacobs didn't make that journey.

Instead, he went from the Manchester Yeshivah to the newly established Gateshead Kolel, where he described himself, at the age of twenty as the 'babe' of the place. In his autobiography he wrote about the ideals of its way of life: 'Every member of the Kolel believed with perfect faith that the Torah (written and oral) is the revealed word of God, therefore to study the Torah is to think God's thoughts after Him. It is to engage the mind in eternal wisdom and truth; to be wondrously united with the divine Author of the Torah.'⁶ Although his views on the question of the direct divine authorship of the Torah were to change, this conception of the meaning and value of learning remained, I believe, his passion and the source of his spiritual communion.

Returning to the Manchester Yeshivah, Rabbi Jacobs received *semichah* from the rosh and from Rabbi Rivkin, head of the Manchester Bet Din.

It was not long after that he met Shula, Shulamit Lisagorska, through his teaching at the *Merkaz Limud* which was frequented by members of *Bachad*, the religious Halutzic movement to which she belonged. It always seemed to me that Rabbi Jacobs was a real romantic. When describing how people, including his own children and grandchildren, had met their partners, he always spoke of 'falling in love' with laughter in his voice and a special brightness in his eyes.

Soon afterwards, the opportunity came for Rabbi Jacobs to take up a rabbinic position at Munk's Shul in Golders Green. He spent happy years there, in the world of German Jewish Orthodoxy. He was to write, and I heard him speak about it too, of how the word discipline, mentioned in a mere whisper, could be invoked to justify any and all Jewish practice.

It was here in London that there came a key turning point in Rabbi Jacobs's life. He studied, first for the BA honours degree, and later for his doctorate, at University College London. The broad and demanding syllabus introduced him to the critical and historical source studies as a result of which, he concluded, '[It] seemed evident to me that both the Higher and Lower Criticism of the Old Testament required a revision of the usual interpretation of the doctrine *Torah min Ha-Shamayim*'.⁷ This issue was to become definitive in Rabbi Jacobs's thought. He wrote that 'There was, and still is, among many observant Jewish scholars a good deal of compartmentalism ... I was never able to accept this "two truths" approach.' On the contrary, all his life Rabbi Jacobs believed that the world of traditional learning and halachic practice could and should be reconciled with the results of modern scholarship. Strictly observant all his days, Rabbi Jacobs's own life was proof of this. Compartmentalisation was to him an offence against the demands of integrity.

Like Maimonides, an important role model, who strove to combine his understanding of Torah with the insights and methodology of Greek philosophy, Rabbi Jacobs believed that the only honest path was to integrate new knowledge into the traditional view of revelation. (Like Maimonides, too, Rabbi Jacobs's opponents were obliged to recognise his stature as an *illui*, a prodigy, and as a *gaon*, a master and genius, however much they attacked him in public. Indeed, rabbis would come to see Rabbi Jacobs in private, thus proving the immense respect in which he was held by all sectors of the community for his learning, in order to discuss in quiet the doubts they could not acknowledge in public).

Another of Rabbi Jacobs's heroes was Nachman Krochmal, a founding father of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the scientific study of Judaism, who died in Tarnopol in 1840. I often heard Rabbi Jacobs speak about Krochmal's *Moreh Nevuchei Hazeman*; *The Guide To The Perplexed In Time*, or, as Rabbi Jacobs would have phrased it, *The Guide To The Perplexed Because Of Time*. Krochmal recognised the new challenge of history and was willing to face and acknowledge both the insights and the difficulties it brought. Maimonides didn't have to face those challenges. Maimonides, Rabbi Jacobs would say, was a fundamentalist; he was entitled to be because the knowledge available to us was not at his disposal. But, as Rabbi Jacobs put it in *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, the real question was not what Maimonides said, but 'what a teacher of his intellectual integrity would say if he were alive today'.⁸

Rabbi Jacobs believed in *Torah min Ha-Shamayim*, in Torah from Heaven. It is essential to stress this point, about which he often felt misinterpreted. Only, he would say, it depends on what one means by 'from'. Revelation, to Rabbi Jacobs, was real. He had no respect for the reduction of Judaism to 'folkways'. But revelation came through the process of history, though the reaching out of man towards God. He therefore loved the metaphor of quest and the imagery of seeking and searching. It's no accident (and not only because he was once arrested by US officials on the charge of being a Cuban spy, no doubt on account of his dark complexion and goatee beard) that he entitled his autobiography *Helping with Enquiries*. Nor is it by chance that the yearbooks of his synagogue took the name *Quest*. He had unshakeable faith in God as a supernatural being, as, so he put it, certainly not less than a person, though beyond description in human terms. The ultimate being was far more than 'the power that makes for good'. Hence Rabbi Jacobs liked to use the term 'liberal supernaturalism' to describe his theology.

Meanwhile, his rabbinical career had taken Rabbi Jacobs, via a return to Manchester, to the prodigious London pulpit of the New West End. He

enjoyed the intellectual life of the community immensely and his book, *We Have Reason To Believe*, was based on discussions he had led in study circles with synagogue members. Simon Roker wrote of it recently in the *Jewish Chronicle* (10 March, 2006) as ‘that small book that detonated modern British Jewry’s biggest religious crisis’. But it created no such stir when it was first published in 1957. Going over back copies of *The Synagogue Review*, I recently came across a review by Rabbi Rhinehart in which there was no word of the controversy the volume was to evoke. This is because there was no controversy for several years, until the then Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie refused to confirm Rabbi Jacobs’s appointment as principal of Jews’ College. Reluctantly leaving the New West End, Rabbi Jacobs had joined the staff of the college as moral tutor and lecturer in pastoral theology on the understanding that he would become principal when Dr Epstein retired. But, despite widespread support for Rabbi Dr Jacobs’s candidacy, the Chief Rabbi refused to confirm the appointment, over which he had a veto. This refusal led to Rabbi Jacobs’s resignation, together with that of the honorary officers of the college. The Chief Rabbi then refused to enable Rabbi Jacobs to return to his earlier position at the New West End. When he was thus left in limbo, Rabbi Jacobs’s followers created the *Society For The Study Of Jewish Theology*, which he headed, followed soon afterwards by the establishment of The New London Synagogue.

Together with all who revered and followed him, I’ve often thought about how Anglo-Jewry treated Rabbi Jacobs. It has been to the detriment of the community that it hasn’t been able to find an honoured place within its establishment for open debate, free of denominational barriers, founded simply and squarely on the issues of truth and integrity. Even today, those matters are often sidelined and pushed away in a return to tradition which, if it fails to face the issues Rabbi Jacobs raised, will one day suffer from the consequences. I believed we have failed as a community to accord Rabbi Jacobs the honour he deserved. We have failed no less to face the issues which he pursued with such integrity, and at such cost.

Yet Rabbi Jacobs loved Anglo-Jewry, and compared it favourably with an America (of which he was often critical) where his ideas were much more broadly and bravely received. At least he finally did receive the honour which had so long been his due when he was chosen by popular vote as the greatest British Jew of the last 350 years. It’s only a shame that Shula didn’t live to witness this act of recognition and the great public joy which it brought to so many in the community.

The New London Synagogue was created in 1964 by members of the New West End who resigned, appalled by the way its former rabbi, now refused reinstatement, had been treated. Rabbi Jacobs loved The New

London Synagogue, served it for the majority of his working life, almost forty years, was zealous for it, didn't want to retire and, like Shula, could never really bear separation from it. This was the setting for the prime of his career and from this pulpit he set out his philosophy time and time again. The New London was to him the bastion of Anglo-Jewry, what Anglo-Jewry had been and what it should have remained: orthodox in constitution, tolerant and progressive in thought (that was never an oxymoron to Rabbi Jacobs) and conforming to *minhag angliah*, which included canonicals, dog collar, mixed choir, top hats and certain formalities Rabbi Jacobs's love of which, may he forgive me, I never could quite understand.

There were numerous special and close relationships between Rabbi Jacobs and the members, chairmen, officers and officiants of the synagogue. But I must mention just one of them: the deep affection between the rabbi and the Reverend George Rothschild, who himself served the community for some twenty years, who loved him and Shula both, and to whom these losses are most deeply felt.

Rabbi Jacobs had a tremendous sense of humour and an immensely wide-ranging fund of anecdotes. I remember one occasion when the person sitting next to me whispered during a lull in the laughter: 'I knew he was a great teacher of Torah, but I didn't appreciate that he was a stand-up comic as well.' One of my favourite stories is the incident recorded in *Helping With Enquiries* when he describes how he is seated next to the editor of the *Daily Mirror*. After the editor had assured him at great length that he agreed with his every word, the latter turned to his wife and said, 'Darling, meet the Chief Rabbi.' Another account, equally piquant, concerns the well-intentioned Hasid who said to Rabbi Jacobs once: 'I hear you don't believe in the *Torah Sheba'al Peh*.' 'No,' he replied, 'it's the *Torah Shebichetav* in which I don't believe.' The matter was, of course, more complicated, but this joke against himself leads deeply into his teachings. He believed in a dynamic Judaism, that the written Torah hadn't simply 'dropped from Heaven', and that the oral Torah wasn't governed like some hermetically sealed system simply by its own internal rules, but that it reflected changes in society, in economics, in relationships between faiths, and indeed in Jewish philosophy and theology themselves.

On a personal level, Rabbi Jacobs always remembered everyone. I never heard him speak, whether at a barmitzvah or at a shivah, without hearing him tell stories in praise of the family. He knew people's history and the *yichus* of their ancestors. He never judged them, just as he never judged from the pulpit, and was always generous in what he had to say. At least two generations are now mourning the death of the rabbi who knew and cared for them over many decades.

I'll speak briefly of my own family, because our story typifies many.

I remember Rabbi Jacobs from when I was a little boy of six or seven, attending the first High Holyday services at the New London when the scaffolding was still standing in the middle of the shul. I recall the tone of Rabbi Jacobs's voice in his preaching; I loved to hear that intonation, and there are certain prayers which I'll hear in his voice for the rest of my life. When Rabbi Jacobs came to my brother's barmitzvah, I remember asking him why he hadn't announced the birth of our three kittens. 'Did you tell the shul secretary?' he inquired, no doubt well experienced in such criticisms. When I was older, I loved to come to shul for Shabbat Minchah. Perhaps the greatest pleasure of all was to listen to Rabbi Jacobs teaching Talmud, to enjoy the clarity, the wit, the humour, the easy reach into commentaries which only the initiated would know how complex and how *recherche* they were. There was a special bond of friendship between Rabbi and Mrs Jacobs and my parents, and my father would come regularly to look after the needs of Rabbi Jacobs's house. I remember the time an owl fell through the chimney, and when the wasps made a nest downstairs. My wife and I were married by Rabbi Jacobs. It was the week of Sidrah *Mishpatim*, 'These are the laws which you shall set before them.' 'Do so gently,' he said. 'Set them gently before people,' he instructed us, as he himself always did. When I became a rabbi, he once said that it was less lonely for him now. I've often thought about that since. It was a token to me of how he didn't have here (in the England he loved) the colleagues whom he would have found in the pre-war Germany of orthodoxy and *Wissenschaft*, or in America today, or in Israel. When Mossy, my son, was at nursery, overlapping there with Rabbi Jacobs's grandson Abraham, he once referred to his 'special friend'. 'Who's your special friend?' Nicky and I asked Mossy eagerly. 'Rabbi Louis Jacobs!' he proudly replied. Only weeks ago, I took Mossy to see Rabbi Jacobs and receive his blessing for his barmitzvah. When I visited Rabbi Jacobs at the London Clinic on Friday he could scarcely speak, but he was struggling to say that he wanted me to convey his thoughts to my parents, since my father had just lost his sister. I marvel at such selflessness.

Rabbi Jacobs was a great public figure; everyone felt they owned a part of him. Therefore it's especially important to return to Rabbi Jacobs's own family. Rabbi Jacobs met Shula in his early twenties; they were married for 61 years and it was a remarkable partnership. She adored him, followed him, sometimes led him, looked after him, wrote of their adventures with a humour and zest for life all her own, was zealous for him, and could on occasion – with good grace and a comic touch – put him in his place, as when she said, speaking at the New North London of their shared life, 'I'll speak in front of anyone *except that man*.'

Rabbi Jacobs was a hero to his children. When they were students they invited him to speak to all their study groups. Rabbi Jacobs was very close to his *mechutanim*, loving to walk in Jerusalem and visit its shuls and shtiebls with Rabbi Dr Carlebach, Tirzah's father, and with Sasson's father also. I can remember him dancing with Rabbi Carlebach at Paula's bat mitzvah. He officiated at the weddings of all three of his children, and at Daniel's, Paula's and Ziva's as well. I remember how Paula and David came to study with Rabbi Jacobs before they were married. Rabbi Jacobs spoke at Michael's bar mitzvah in Israel. The grandchildren loved to be with him.

Loyalty is a byword in the family. The love shown by Ivor, Naomi and David in caring for their father is quite remarkable. They suffered with their father, his humiliations were theirs and they have always been valiant in defence of his honour. In the last years they looked after their mother and father with great and devoted love. Lisa must also be mentioned; she was as devoted in her care, first of Shula, then of Rabbi Jacobs, as if she were a true member of the family.

These paragraphs do no justice to the depth and extent of Rabbi Jacobs's achievements. He published some forty volumes, from studies in Talmudic methodology to works on Hasidism, on rabbinic literature in general, and on theology. Yet, in spite of all this, he humbly called one of his key books, an indispensable classic, *A Jewish Theology*. Many have wondered how it was possible to be so prolific. Only recently, four volumes of his essays appeared in print. Michael Gluckman said to me in amazement: 'Only with Rabbi Jacobs does one speak about publishing not one single book, but *books*, in the plural.'

Rabbi Jacobs's activities in the Jewish world and in the world of scholarship are too numerous to mention. For years he wrote the Ask The Rabbi column in the *Jewish Chronicle*. He was lecturer in Talmud at Leo Baeck College. He lectured at University College London. He was visiting professor in the School of Divinity at Harvard (an experienced immortalised in Shula's letters home). He was for many years visiting professor at Lancaster University.

It's impossible to record even a portion of Rabbi Jacobs's achievements. So I want to conclude with some brief general thoughts about his life and the legacy he leaves us.

Some fifteen years ago, on the way to shul, my wife and I met a man who asked us where we were going. When we explained that we were heading for the New North London Synagogue, he said: 'Ah yes! My head is with Rabbi Jacobs, my heart is in the shtiebl, but my seat, alas, is at. ...'

I believe that the first of these tensions is one which Rabbi Jacobs himself shared for most of his life. His heart was also always in the shtiebl,

but his head led him to a different world and the tension between the two was not always easy for him to bear. He thought of himself as orthodox all the days of his life. He still hoped that bridge-building would be possible, even now. He never wanted to establish a new movement. In a way, a new movement was irrelevant to him. What he wanted was for the orthodox world to recognise not only the justice of his position, but, more importantly, the inevitable necessity of facing up to the issues which he, but not they, had the courage to confront. He would often speak of his desire to create 'a mood, not a movement, in Anglo-Jewry'. I believe he hadn't struggled, with great pain, to escape one particular box in order to be placed in another. But it must be questionable whether Anglo-Jewry has shown any real sign of openness to such a mood, a mood of deep traditionalism and the practice of *halachah*, compassionately interpreted, together with a non-fundamentalist approach to revelation and the history of both the written and the oral Torah and the acceptance of truth from whatever source it comes.

We, your followers, Rabbi Jacobs, stand here today in grief and sorrow. We have devoted our lives to following Torah according to your teachings. We are committed to learning, to truth, to a traditional Judaism free from fundamentalism. True, we have passed through doors which you held open but didn't necessarily want to pass through yourself. Inevitably, we live in a different generation and face challenges which are not quite the same. Yet we too are passionate about our quest and have not reneged on it. We need you to be present with us and bless in spirit the work of our hands.

May his learning be fruitful among us and may the memory of his brilliance and uprightness and goodness be for a blessing.

Notes

1. *Helping With Inquiries*, p. 4
2. *Ibid.*, p. 14
3. *Ibid.*, p. 29
4. *Ibid.*, p. 33
5. *Ibid.*, p. 62
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 48–9
7. *Ibid.*, p. 77
8. *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, p. 22