

JOSEPH HERTZ: A CHIEF RABBI AT WAR

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Abstract

In office, from the 'New' rather than the 'Old' World, indeed the first ordinand of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Joseph Herman Hertz moved among kings and grandees, ministering to two communities, different religiously, culturally and socially. One, an established 'West End' community, was assimilated and integrated; the other was a newer, larger, faster-growing, immigrant 'East End' community. He had to be a bridge between these two communities. Within a year of taking office, this American Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire was thrust into a world conflict that confronted him with tensions and challenges to his patriotism, his authority and his faith. Ultimately his period of office would be 'bracketed' by two world wars.

Joseph Herman Hertz came to office in 1913 as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire with high expectations on him from others and from himself.¹ He was aware that he was the 'new boy', following in illustrious footsteps. He knew that one reason he had been nominated was to try to create a cohesive Jewish community by bringing together the older, established, anglicized community and the increasingly larger immigrant community, newly arrived since the 1880s from Eastern Europe. Hermann Adler, his predecessor, had done little to try to narrow the gap, which meant that, as immigrant numbers increased, that gap had widened. Hertz must have been aware that his origin, training and style were different from those of Adler.

Born in Hungary in 1872, he came with his family to New York when he was ten years old. After university, he went to the Jewish Theological Seminary and, in 1894, he was the first rabbi to be ordained by them. During his fourth year in a synagogue in upstate New York, he was approached by a representative of an Orthodox community in Johannesburg looking for an enlightened Orthodox rabbi whose native tongue was English rather than Yiddish and who had, preferably, American experience. He arrived in 1898 as tensions between the English and the Boers were running very high. Early on he showed pro-British sympathies so that when the Anglo-Boer War began

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a year later, Paul Kruger's government declared him *persona non grata* and deported him to Portuguese East Africa (present-day Mozambique). The mythology has it that he was on the train on which Winston Churchill, a British war correspondent with a price on his head, was hiding to evade capture; and that Hertz, apparently weak from thirst, got off the train and collapsed – into Churchill's arms.²

After some fifteen years in South Africa he returned to New York, to be rabbi of a prestigious Manhattan synagogue. In 1913, he was Lord Rothschild's favourite for the post of Chief Rabbi, though he was not initially very popular. Then, barely more than a year into office, he became a Chief Rabbi at war: with Germany, obviously, but also with some of his colleagues in the provinces as well as with a public opinion not always sympathetic to Jews. It is those dimensions that will be explored in this article.

Hertz became Chief Rabbi at a time when old certainties were no longer quite so certain. In the sermon at his installation service on 14 April 1913, he reflected that:

Ours is an age of doubt and disillusionment. Times are out of joint. Theological foundations are rocking. Dreams of humanity, that but yesterday seemed within grasp of realisation, are dissolving into thin air in face of the malicious race-hatred that is being fanatically preached, and the purposeless human slaughter so cynically practised in the opening decades of the twentieth century.³

Fifteen months later the First World War began. Remarkably his Chief Rabbinate would be bracketed by two world wars. He died in 1946.

Thrust into his unexpected role as Chief Rabbi at war, he was required to deal with wartime issues which diverted much of his energy and attention from the 'manifesto' all new Chief Rabbis spell out in their installation sermon.⁴ Instead he had to deal with Russian Jewish aliens, tension with the Leeds Beth Din, and accusations and insinuations that Jews were shirking their patriotic duty to fight, while at the same time working to maintain the fabric of Jewish life both at home and for those in the armed forces.

In 1914, Great Britain had neither conscription nor national service. But by spring 1915, military losses were no longer being made up by new volunteers. With the 1916 Military Service Act, single men between eighteen and forty-one years old were to be called up. Married men, widowers with children and those in reserved jobs – which included clergymen – were exempt from the call-up. Issues of exemption arose.

An undated document in the Chief Rabbi's archives, probably written by his secretary, Emmanuel Drielsma, recognizes that an 'unpleasant situation' has arisen because of the number of men claiming exemption because they are 'ministers of the Jewish religion'.⁵ While the status of full-time ministers

before 1914 was clear, the Chief Rabbi's Office would investigate those appointed after August 1914 to determine 'absolute genuineness' or otherwise. It recognized that:

Many applicants for such certificates, however, are not full-time ministers, but only lay readers who are, or have been until quite recently, actively engaged in another occupation. A goodly number are theological students between the ages of 17 and 21; or even men who till a few months ago were never engaged in any religious work. They apply to the Chief Rabbinate for certificates; but needless to say, no certificate is issued to such men. As their one object is the evasion of military service, they persist in their claim that they are ministers; and, in due course, their case is brought by the Military Authorities into the magistrate's Court for decision. At the magistrate's Court they allege that they are not under the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbi; and they produce documents from 'foreign' rabbis,⁶ or Legal Agreements freshly entered into with so-called congregations, which are mere Prayer Meetings; or certificates from Theological colleges which have no right to issue such certificates qualifying for the Jewish ministry.

There were, clearly, questions relating to the authority of the Chief Rabbi vis-à-vis that of other rabbis outside his ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Drielsma acknowledges that this creates confusion for all and concludes: 'All those who are familiar with the conditions of the problem are agreed that the Chief Rabbi is the one authority that can be safely appealed to for this expert advice'. In another document, undated but probably from 1917, Hertz argued that it was necessary to retain a sufficient number of students in '*yeshiboth*' (Talmudic training schools) who would continue 'the traditional form of learning which appeals to the parents of strict orthodoxy while their English education fits them to teach Anglo-Jewish children'. Such men would be needed even more, he argued, because of (what came to be known as the February) Revolution in Russia:

Russia as a source of supply of teachers and ministrants is likely to be less available than hitherto, as after the war the conditions of freedom likely then to be established will tend to retain Russian Jews in Russia and possibly lead to the return to Russia of many who are now resident here.

He argued for the exemption of yeshivah students: numbers would be very small and many might not pass the medical test, anyway. There would be 'a very inappreciable loss to the military strength of the country'.

The advantage to England of a locally educated Jewish intellectual class is, in the light of the lessons of history, obvious, since every country has derived benefit from the presence therein of an educated and informed Jewry, trained in the environment of the country.⁷

He did not spell out that ‘an educated and informed Jewry’ meant, essentially, men who would be Talmudically educated; nor that they were unlikely to acquire the secular education there which would train them ‘in the environment of the country’.

The tenor of both documents – with statements such as ‘only a small number being involved’ or ‘the advantage to England’ – as well as their somewhat apologetic style and tone suggest that they were intended for a non-Jewish readership, to demonstrate that Jews were as patriotic as any other citizen.

From the outbreak of war, Jews had been keen to demonstrate that patriotism. The *Jewish Chronicle* for 2 October 1914 had a full-page spread in English and Yiddish:

Since the days of Oliver Cromwell, Great Britain has meted out the fairest treatment politically, socially and in every way to Jews. Now is the time to reciprocate and show that the old spirit of the Maccabees is not dead. Every able-bodied unmarried Jew should join the British Army. Join as Jews and be proud of your race. God save the King.⁸

A photograph from the *Jewish Chronicle* shows their offices (then in Finsbury Square) with a banner across the front of the building bearing the legend: ‘England has been everything she can be for the Jews; now is the time for Jews to be everything they can be for England’.⁹

In an Intercession Day sermon, in August 1915, Hertz used Biblical verses in support of the war effort, quoting from the Biblical episode of the Binding of Isaac:

Like Abraham of old, British parents have voluntarily obeyed the summons, *Take thy son, whom thou lovest* (Gen. 22:2) and give up thy dearest for the peace and safety of the realm. Mourning has entered the homes of tens of thousands, and theirs is a solemn pride in the great sacrifice that they have laid on the altar of their country.

And in that sermon he also makes an allusive reference to God’s words to Cain:

Uncertain though the future may be, no! so is the spirit in which it is to be faced. Ours must be the will to win. Tiger-like, the demons of hatred, envy and revenge are crouching at the gates of England’s life. Unto it is their desire. But with the help of God we shall surely master them if we but resolve never to submit or yield: And what is else not to be overcome.¹⁰

En passant, he also refers in this sermon to the pogroms and mass expulsions of Jews taking place in areas occupied by the Russian army in the Pale of Settlement, numbering anything up to three hundred thousand:

In past ages we looked upon such suffering as purifying for the ultimate good of Israel and mankind. It is difficult for us to maintain this belief when we contemplate the millions of our brethren in the Eastern War Zone mercilessly buffeted by waves of calculated inhumanity.... [W]e are now confronted by a martyrdom, purposeless, unpitied, which it is almost a crime to make known. Formerly, enemies of the Jew undertook to make him contemptible by charging him with cowardice. As this is now patently absurd, in view of his wonder-compelling response to the call of his mother-land, the latest resort is to charge entire Jewish populations with treason.¹¹

Two years later, in a Pesach sermon in the *Jewish Chronicle*, he wrote of four hundred thousand Russian Jews ‘fighting on the side of Justice, Humanity, Liberty’, with almost thirty-nine thousand killed in action or dying of their wounds. ‘Only last year [in 1916]’, he said, ‘half the Jews in the world spoke the literal truth at their Seder when they uttered the words, “This year we are slaves”’.¹²

The reiteration of such themes as ‘Jewish sacrifice’, ‘responding to the call of the motherland’ and so on reveal a sensitivity to potential or real accusations that Jews were shirkers – a charge directed against Jews in most of the combatant nations during the First World War, most notoriously perhaps in the German army census. This was often the context in which Hertz’s office dealt with claims for religious exemption. One such case, in June 1917, concerns three men from Leeds: Barney Young, Marks Reece and Hyman Rosenberg.

The Leeds Recruiting Office had asked the Chief Rabbi if he had any record of these three men on his list of ‘Ministers of the Jewish Religion’.¹³ Hertz’s office replied that they were not on his list but that one of the Leeds rabbis had written stating that they perform some ministerial duties. Hertz was due to visit Leeds later that month, he added, and would make enquiries on the spot. After that visit, he wrote to the Military Tribunal explaining that Barney Young was a wool merchant and Marks Reece a ‘working man’. He acknowledged that they had done some ministerial work, but only since 1914; ‘I feel I would not be justified’, he concluded, ‘in classifying such men as regular clergymen within the meaning of the Military Act’.¹⁴

Later that month another query about the three men came to the Chief Rabbi, this time from the War Office itself. Hertz’s secretary replied that the Chief Rabbi ‘is not prepared to say that they are regular ministers of the Jewish Religion’.¹⁵ He offered to send a representative of the Chief Rabbi’s office to speak to the tribunal.¹⁶ On hearing about that suggestion, the Leeds Beth Din wrote to the secretary saying that they would like to meet with Hertz’s representative ‘before appearing in court so as to avoid a *Chillul HaShem*’.¹⁷ It is unclear how that case ended, but the archival material and the columns

of the *Jewish Chronicle* reveal how acute were the tensions between London and Leeds.

Hertz was concerned to maintain the integrity of Jewish communal life as far as he possibly could in wartime. He knew there were ‘friendly aliens’, Russian Jews, who were not interned or called up because they were foreign nationals. Sometimes they were the only men of army age seen on the streets in mufti, and there was increasing clamour for them either to enlist voluntarily in the British Army or to go back to Russia to fight for the tsar. Indeed, it had spilled over into anti-Semitic riots, albeit short-lived, in September 1916 in both Leeds and London.¹⁸

The following month, in a sermon on the Day of Atonement, Hertz addressed this issue:

To every son and daughter of Israel the Day of Atonement addresses the question: ‘Are you living your life worthily, true to your God and true to your people? Or will, through you, the Jewish cause be dishonoured and the Divine Name desecrated?’

In accents that cannot be drowned do these words reverberate in our ears today, when the Jewish community is confronted with a serious problem of present-day duty. We rejoice to think that hosts of our brethren are gladly offering their lives for Right: that the number of those in England alone who have responded to the call of their country is nearly 25,000. But we grieve to think of the few thousands among the hundreds of thousands constituting the Jewish citizenship of the allied nations who desire to be exempted from the fulfilment of their elementary duty of patriotism. We lament this fact and consider it a great danger threatening the fair name of Israel. Even a little wet straw can produce enough smoke to hide the stars. And remembering the injustice with which the world so often judges Israel, we have, alas, good reason to fear that the sacrifices, nay, the martyrdom of the half a million of our brethren fighting in Russia, and the scores of thousands in the other belligerent countries, will count as naught because of the two or three thousand Jews who are laggards.¹⁹

While Hertz was struggling not to be drawn into colluding with those trying to evade military service on spurious religious grounds, another dimension of the exemption issue arose, and with the same rabbis of the Leeds Beth Din. The issue here concerned Jews who claimed to be *Cohanim*, priests, descendants of the priests who offered sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple that had been destroyed almost two thousand years previously. Particular rules of ritual purity applied to them, for a state of ritual impurity disqualified them from performing their priestly functions that were still feasible.²⁰ Contact with the dead was a major source of ritual defilement. Could a *Cohen* serve in the army in wartime, therefore, where contact with the dead was commonplace?

The issue came to the Jewish public's attention in the *Jewish Chronicle* in March 1916, shortly after the introduction of conscription:

At the City Tribunal on Tuesday Major de Rothschild MP announced that he had communicated with the Chief Rabbi on the subject of the exemption of *Cohanim* and the Chief Rabbi's secretary had replied: 'with regard to the exact answer to be given to recruiting officers who receive refusals to serve from men who state they are *Cohanim*, the Chief Rabbi wishes to say that when the safety of the country is at stake, no exemptions from military service can be justly claimed by any person on the ground that he is a Cohen.' ... Major de Rothschild ... trusted that this ruling would be noted by tribunals throughout the country.²¹

A protest meeting against the Chief Rabbi's ruling was organized in Leeds on 26 March. The local press reported on it the following day, the *Jewish Chronicle* in its next issue.²² Some fifty *Cohanim* had attended. The chairman of the protest meeting (Joe Cohen) 'bitterly complained' about the Chief Rabbi's 'interference' in the matter and urged other communities, including the 'foreign rabbis', to protest against what he believed was a 'misinterpretation of the Jewish Law on the part of the Chief Rabbi'. Despite many 'abusive attacks' on the Chief Rabbi, somebody suggested that it would be a *Chillul HaShem* if the Chief Rabbi was not first asked for clarification of his ruling. The meeting resolved to ask him to reconsider his decision. The Leeds Beth Din then drew up a response to the Chief Rabbi, presenting the issue as a matter of 'conscientious objection':

We think he [the Chief Rabbi] did not consider the question thoroughly. He thought that the *Cohanim* are claiming total exemption, but in reality they only claim not to be in the firing line so as not to defile their *Kehuna* [priestly status], which is in force today as in former years and in every circumstance. There we think that they are justified in claiming their right according to Jewish law, especially as the Government has been considerate enough not to overrule the conscientious objection of the individual. This claim is a very strong conscientious objection, for if they transgress this they are deprived of the privileges attached to the *Cohanim*. In addition to this defilement, there is a distinct enactment in the Talmud, to the following effect: 'A Cohen who has killed a man, even unintentionally, is no longer allowed to exercise the duties and privileges as a Cohen; especially must he not bless the people as other *Cohanim* do on every Festival.'²³

The Chief Rabbi responded the following week.

The letter of the reverend gentlemen is due to a misunderstanding of the Act of Parliament and a strange interpretation of the Jewish Law.... The parliamentary exemption in the Military Service Act is restricted to those who object to the taking of human life, not those who simply disapprove of combatant service, on the alleged ground that it might entail the sacrifice of some privilege, religious or otherwise.

A *Cohen* who murders or commits manslaughter is barred from priestly functions, he said, but it is patently nonsense to see a soldier fighting for his country as guilty of manslaughter! ‘That’, he argues, ‘is nothing less than a libel on Judaism, and the claim for the exemption of *Cohanim* from combatant service ... is without precedent in Jewish Law or practice.’²⁴

Allegations flew back and forth about whether ignorance of Jewish law was located more in London or Leeds. But the argument had moved beyond that of the specific question and into the broader issue of where religious authority really lay.

Hertz did not seem to have the upper ground in this matter. For those rabbis of the Leeds Beth Din, his title, ‘Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations and the British Empire’, probably carried little or no weight; while his rabbinic ordination by a new, ‘New World’ institution might have seemed rather ‘lightweight’ in comparison with the Lithuanian rabbinic seminaries. Hertz’s command of Jewish law was probably suspect in their eyes. Indeed, they virtually said so in the *Jewish Chronicle*.²⁵

In a letter of 2 May to the Leeds Beth Din, the Chief Rabbi noted ‘with deep regret’ that the Leeds Beth Din continues to insist that the laws of *Cohanim* apply in every circumstance:

a statement which is quite contrary to fact and calculated to mislead both the Tribunal and the *Cohanim*. But he is glad to find that you have receded from your former position so that you now write: ‘If a Cohen who felt that his country was calling and that his first duty was to his country went and fought in a war no one would deprive him of his privileges’.²⁶

Finally the Leeds Beth Din had accepted the Chief Rabbi’s ruling. But the issue rumbled on, occasionally resurfacing, as in an undated draft of a letter from Emmanuel Drielsma to Rev. M. Abrahams, the secretary of the Leeds Beth Din. This was in response to one of the rabbis of the Leeds Beth Din telling a military tribunal that they were completely independent from the Chief Rabbi and the London Beth Din.²⁷

On 20 December, the Chief Rabbi wrote at length to Rev. Abrahams, lamenting the state of affairs in Leeds, saying that he had taken action to try to resolve misunderstandings, but nothing seemed to have happened. This was bringing the name of local Jewry into disrepute. ‘The situation’, he concluded, ‘is certainly unpleasant to me in my determination to uphold the honour of Jewry to local abuse.’²⁸

I wish to conclude with two extracts.

On Shabbat 16 November 1918, five days after the Armistice, Hertz wrote a prayer to be recited at Thanksgiving services throughout the country. Following an expression of gratitude to God – ‘Thou didst turn a day of wrath and desolation ... into a day of gladness and rejoicing, a day of victory and

salvation unto us. Broken is the sceptre of the oppressor⁷ – the prayer ended with these words:

Av harachamim, Father of Mercy, cheer with gladsome tidings the hearts of those who long for their absent kinfolk. Send healing to the wounded, and Thy heavenly comfort to all who weep for the loss of those dear to them. . . . O make Thou wars to cease unto the end of the earth and hasten the days when nation shall not lift up sword against nation. . . . Implant Thou a new heart and a faithful spirit in the peoples, so that envy and hatred perish from among the children of Men. And may they speedily form one League of Brotherhood, bringing justice and righteousness, and proclaiming liberty and peace unto all the dwellers on earth.²⁹

In 1922 the *British Jewry Book of Honour* was published, listing every Jew who had served in the armed forces, from every country in the empire and in every theatre of war. It was edited by the Reverend Michael Adler who had been Senior Jewish Chaplain during the war. Hertz wrote the introduction, which concluded:

This permanent written record of the part played by Anglo-Jewry in the Great War will help lovers of the Truth in their warfare against the malicious slander that the Jew shirks from the sacrifices demanded of every loyal citizen in the hour of national danger.

Four years after the end of the war, Hertz still seemed concerned about what the anti-Semite might say about Jewish participation in the war.

Notes

1. For others' expectations of him see the *Jewish Chronicle* (thereafter *JC*), 18 April 1913, p. 15; 15 December 1913, p. 11. For his own expectations of himself, see J.H. Hertz, 'Installation Sermon' in *Sermons, Addresses and Studies*, 3 vols, London 1938, vol. 1, pp. 3–14, esp. pp. 12–13.
2. S. Temkin, 'Orthodoxy with Moderation: A Sketch of Joseph Herman Hertz', *Judaism* 24, no. 3, 1975, p. 285.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. London Metropolitan Archives (thereafter LMA), ACC 2805/04/04/013.
6. One such 'foreign' rabbi was Avraham Kook who had been visiting London before the outbreak of war. Prevented from returning to Palestine (still part of the Ottoman Empire) by the war, he was rabbi of the *Machzikei Hadass* Synagogue in the East End of London. In 1919 he returned to Palestine and become the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine in 1921.
7. 'Memorandum on the Status of Students of Yeshiboth', LMA, ACC 2805/04/04/021.
8. *JC*, 2 October 1914, p. 13.
9. *JC*, 21 August 1914, pp. 11–12.

10. Genesis 4:7, 'Sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master'. Reported in the *JC*, 6 August 1915. See also John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, lines 8–9.
11. *Ibid.*; Intercession Day Service, Great Synagogue, London, 4 August 1915.
12. *JC*, 13 April 1917, p. 12.
13. LMA, ACC 2805/04/04/009, 12 June 1917.
14. *Ibid.*, 1 August 1917.
15. *Ibid.*, 20 September 1917.
16. *Ibid.*, 3 October 1917.
17. *Ibid.*, 10 October 1917. 'Chillul HaShem', literally 'profanation of the [Divine] Name', is the phrase used when the name of God, the Jewish religion or the Jewish community is liable to be brought into disrepute.
18. In July and September 1916 respectively.
19. Sermon on the Day of Atonement, 7 October 1916, from *JC*, 13 October 1916, p. 12.
20. Originally enunciated in the Biblical Book of Leviticus, and then expanded on and developed in subsequent post-Biblical rabbinic literature.
21. *JC*, 17 March 1916, p. 21.
22. 'Should the Priest Smarch [*sic*] Too?', *Yorkshire Evening News*, 27 March 1916. The article is on file in University of Southampton, Hartley Library, Papers of Chief Rabbi JH Hertz (1872–1946), MS175 141/2.
23. Southampton MS 175 141/2.
24. Letter from Emmanuel Drielsma to Joe Cohen, 7 April 1916. LMA, ACC 2805/04/02/059. Subsequently published in the *JC*, 14 April 1916, p. 18.
25. Letter dated 16 April, published in *JC*, 5 May 1916, p. 16.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Draft letter from Emmanuel Drielsma to the Reverend M. Abrahams (secretary, Leeds Beth Din), LMA, ACC 2805/04/02/060.
28. 20 December 1917, LMA, ACC 2805/04/02/060.
29. *JC*, 15 November 1918, p. 10. See also the sermon delivered by Hertz at the Armistice Thanksgiving Service held on Sunday, 17 November 1918, in *Sermons, Addresses and Studies*, vol. 1, pp. 37–42, at <http://www.religionandwar.org>.