



## English Centre vs. Celtic Periphery

Abrams, Nathan

## Jewish Culture and History

Published: 01/06/2018

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Abrams, N. (2018). English Centre vs. Celtic Periphery: The Chief Rabbi, Shechita and Dundee, 1883. *Jewish Culture and History*, 19(2), 154-168.

### Hawliau Cyffredinol / General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **English Centre vs. Celtic Periphery: The Chief Rabbi, *Shechita* and Dundee, 1883**

Nathan Abrams\*

School of Creative Studies and Media, Bangor University, Bangor, UK.

### **Abstract**

Using a case study from Dundee this article scrutinises historians' assumptions about the nature of links between the major British-Jewish centres and 'the periphery'. Utilising a cache of letters addressed to the Chief Rabbi concerning the provision of a trained Jewish butcher (*shochet*) in 1883, Abrams considers the Jewish community of Dundee in northeast Scotland as an example of Jews at a temporal, organisational, cultural and geographical frontier. The episode to which these letters refer tests the assumption of Anglo-Jewish historians that provincial communities were considered, and considered themselves, subordinate to the regularly-constituted ecclesiastical authorities in London. Abrams instead presents the argument that, as the boundaries of the community, the congregation, the British-Jewish population, and even the powers and authority of the Chief Rabbi expanded, Jewish life and formal processes between centre and periphery in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were dramatically different to what was previously thought.

**Keywords:** Scotland, Dundee, centre, periphery, chief rabinete, kashrut

### **Introduction**

In a chapter entitled, 'The Frontier as a Model for Jewish History', Sander Gilman asks us to 'imagine a new Jewish history written as the history of the Jews at the frontier, a history with no center, a history marked by the dynamics of change, confrontation, and accommodation, a history that focuses on the present and in which all participants are given voice'.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this, he argues, is that it 'overall offers a more nuanced reading of Jewish experience'

\*n.abrams@bangor.ac.uk

that does not ‘condemn the periphery to the marginal’.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite the growth in the field of non-Anglo Jewish History in Britain and Ireland,<sup>3</sup> there are still significant gaps in our knowledge. One such area is the nature of the relationship between the centre and the periphery or frontier in British Jewish life.<sup>4</sup> Whether we like to use the term or not, Jews on ‘the Celtic Fringe’, certainly where the UK is concerned, are peripheral, both geographically and in terms of affecting the mainstream of British Jewish life. In 1901 the then Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler declared frankly that the ‘average’ Jew in London ‘pays scant attention to “Provincial Judaism” unless ‘he be startled by hearing of an impending suit in a Court of Law by reading a sensational exaggerated statement regarding some unruliness’.<sup>5</sup> And a century later Todd Endelman wrote, ‘What happens elsewhere, however piquant or arresting in human terms, reveals little about the main currents of Anglo-Jewish history’.<sup>6</sup>

It is indeed the case that the centre of UK Jewish life is located in London, as that is where the key institutions are situated, but little has been done to date that critically examines the relationship between London and the UK’s smaller and remoter communities on the periphery or frontier of British-Jewish life. While existing scholarship offers some tantalizing glimpses of the centre-periphery relationship, because its focus tends towards the capital, its discussion of the frontier is limited.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, where the relationship has been examined from the perspective of the provincial community itself (for example, Portsmouth, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester and, occasionally, Glasgow), by virtue of their wealth, size and prominence, there are also doubts about the applicability of their experiences to the specificities of those peripheral communities on the frontier. Furthermore, it is questionable whether such communities can be described as either ‘frontier’ or ‘periphery’, as they could afford ‘their own independent communal structures’.<sup>8</sup> In effect, they became centres in their own right in comparison to those frontier communities on ‘the Celtic Fringe’, which lacked similar resources.<sup>9</sup>

The peripheral communities on the frontier were, to use Bill Williams' words, 'not a pale reflection of that of London'.<sup>10</sup> Instead, they developed distinctive lives and peculiar dynamics of their own which, although revealing little about 'the main currents of Anglo-Jewish history', are still worthy of study in their own right. Furthermore, research into the relationship between these peripheral frontier congregations and London will shed light on the extent of the reach, remit and writ of the Office of the Chief Rabbi, the titular head of the Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth in respect of the periphery of British-Jewish life. Conversely, to turn Endelman on his head, perhaps what happens in London, however piquant or arresting in human terms, reveals little about the main currents *elsewhere* in British-Jewish geography.

This article, then, with reference to a particular case study, explores one frontier community in Scotland, in order to shed some light on the centre-periphery relationship at a specific moment in British-Jewish history. In so doing, it provides a snapshot that may have some generalizable suggestions for the wider picture. Taking Gilman's model of the frontier and the periphery, it will consider the Jewish community of Dundee in northeast Scotland as an example of Jews at a temporal, organisational, cultural and geographical frontier, based on an excellent resource of an unusual cache of letters addressed to the Chief Rabbi concerning the provision of a trained Jewish butcher (*shochet*) in 1883. The episode to which these letters refer certainly tests Cecil Roth's contention that 'the provincial communities were considered, and considered themselves, subordinate to the regularly-constituted ecclesiastical authorities in London'.<sup>11</sup> Rather, as the boundaries of the community, the congregation, the British-Jewish population, and even the powers and authority of the Chief Rabbi expanded, these papers provide a real insight into what life was like, how decisions were taken, and how processes worked between centre and periphery in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

## **The Dundee Jewish Community in Context**

The Jewish community in Dundee was formally set up in 1878 with the establishment of the Dundee Hebrew Congregation.<sup>12</sup> Shortly thereafter, large numbers of Jews began to arrive from Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Belorussia, Poland, Lithuania and Russia), as the years from 1881 to 1914 witnessed large-scale immigration into Britain by Jews either fleeing persecution or seeking economic betterment; a process eased by quicker and lower-priced mass transportation by the railway and steamship. Although many Jews simply passed through as a stopping point on the transmigration route to the United States and other points in Britain, many others stayed. As with other Jewish immigrants to Britain, since they had primarily been town dwellers in Eastern Europe, they tended to migrate towards urban rather than rural areas. Those new immigrants who were drawn to Dundee did so because of the promise of port commerce and other business opportunities. They joined a pre-existing community of German Jews who had arrived in the 1840s. The number of Jews was such that, for a time, Dundee was the largest Jewish community in Scotland outside of Glasgow and Edinburgh, reaching a recorded peak of 160 paying members over the period 1899-1901 according to the *Jewish Year Book*. These newcomers were Yiddish-speaking, poor, living in the impoverished Hilltown district of Dundee and ‘shy and aloof’, having been brought up in a ‘secluded orthodox culture.’<sup>13</sup> Since they had been restricted to certain trades such as finance, tobacco and clothing, as with other Jewish immigrants to Britain they ‘gravitated towards occupations requiring skills they already possessed, or which could be easily learned, and where language problems could be minimised.’<sup>14</sup> The majority were self-employed, owning stalls in Dundee’s Green Market and city arcade, tea rooms, lodging houses, general stores, and pawn and material shops.<sup>15</sup>

In religious terms, these newcomers initially set up their own *chevra*,<sup>16</sup> worshipping at a site at 7 Ward Road, rented rooms within a block of warehouses and offices.<sup>17</sup> They did not join, or rapidly left, the existing community because they regarded it as snobbish, assimilated, irreligious and too ‘*English*’. In return, the longer settled Jews in Dundee regarded the newcomers as ill-educated, superstitious and *Ostjuden* (German: lit. ‘Eastern Jews’). As Miri Freud-Kandel put it:

Each community looked at the other with considerable horror. The native community was shocked by the foreignness of the immigrants and what they viewed as their uncivilised social and religious demeanour. The immigrants, for their part, could not comprehend the Jewish identity that the native community had evolved.<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence, the two groups of Jews kept themselves apart leading to two distinctive sub-communities each with its own synagogue, reflecting the differences in liturgical style as well as practice.<sup>19</sup>

The community of newcomers, however, further divided into two rival *chevrot*. A synagogue was set up in Bank Street in addition to the aforementioned Ward Road site.<sup>20</sup> This was not an unusual feature of small immigrant communities: as Bill Williams has pointed out in Manchester, lacking ‘a prestigious place of worship to embody their own religious styles’, their needs were met by ‘a galaxy of chevrot, many of them transient, changing their locations and names in response to a poor but dynamic Eastern European working class’.<sup>21</sup> While the exact nature of the split in Dundee is unknown, it was instigated in part by a large measure of personal differences. The precise dates of the establishment of these two smaller synagogues are also unknown but the available information indicates they were set up in the period 1880-1883 when the numbers of new immigrants from Eastern Europe were high enough to sustain them. According to the records of the Office of the

Chief Rabbi, it further appears that the Ward Road synagogue pre-dated the one in Bank Street. Thereafter, frictions between the key personalities of the two congregations kept them apart and fighting. Nonetheless, despite these personal differences, the two *chevrot* could probably have coexisted but for their pressing religious requirements, namely the provision of kosher meat. Their enmities came to a head in 1883 over the issue of acquiring a *shochet*, which was an essential requirement for the religious newcomers who adhered to Orthodox Jewish practice, when the Ward Road and Bank Street congregations independently and simultaneously contacted the Chief Rabbi, requesting him to send an approved *shochet* to Dundee.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Shechita* and Schism**

Orthodox Judaism has very precise regulations concerning the provision of kosher meat and only a *shochet*, trained in accordance with *halacha* (normative rabbinic Jewish law), is allowed to slaughter (*shechita*) poultry and cattle in order to render it kosher. Initially, in the absence of a *shochet*, kosher meat was sent by train from the larger and longer established communities in Glasgow and Edinburgh, each of which had its own *shochetim* (plural) from the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Given the coldness of the Scottish climate this was a largely satisfactory – if somewhat inconvenient – temporary arrangement in winter but not at warmer times of the year when the meat tended to spoil. Kosher meat provision was also exacerbated by the significant growth of the community. At the same time, there was an important financial dimension. Not only was the imported meat more expensive, but also the fees imposed by a community for the *shechita* were a means of raising much-needed revenue.<sup>23</sup> As Bill Williams observed of Manchester, newly emerging congregations financed their early growth through their own independent control of *shechita*.<sup>24</sup> The fees paid helped to finance new buildings and the appointment of a rabbi. It also, it was hoped, guaranteed the

superior standards of those who created it.<sup>25</sup> In Scotland, as Collins points out, ‘Small regional Jewish communities depended on the supply of kosher meat to augment the salary of their minister and often to subsidize community organisations’.<sup>26</sup>

A *shochet*’s authority to practise, however, derived from a licence which could only be obtained from the Chief Rabbi in London. Conversely, if he disapproved of a *shochet*, the Chief Rabbi could order his dismissal. As Cecil Roth points out, as far back as the eighteenth century, the ‘unified control of *shehita* [sic], so far as the Ashkenzi community was concerned, had already been established in London under the Rabbi [of the Great Synagogue]’s direction, and it was generally admitted to extend to the provinces also’.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the Chief Rabbi attempted to maintain a centralised form of control and regulation over *shechita* in order to ensure that foreign and unregulated *shochetim* did not enter Britain and practise in open competition with each other. Similarly, only licensed butchers could sell the properly slaughtered meat, and a community could not export its meat to another community without permission, which invariably required a fee. This income was used to subsidise communal activities, such as the Jewish Board of Guardians, and hence the Great Synagogue was loath to tolerate any independence that might dent its income.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, every community, congregation and individual required the Chief Rabbi’s approval to operate *shechita* or otherwise ran certain risks, for such actions were perceived as ‘rebellious snubs’.<sup>29</sup>

*Shechita* must also be contextualised within a broader pattern of ‘Anglicisation’ measures and community regulation by the Chief Rabbi. Opposition to unregulated ministers, the opening of Jews’ College in London in 1855 for the training of ministers, readers and teachers, as well as its steady growth as a means of producing ‘approved’ clergy, and the promotion of ‘united’ congregations, namely immigrant Jews coming under the same roof as those who were British-born, were all part of broader attempts to regulate immigrant



religious life at the centre and the periphery. This meant regulating kosher food and the fees it generated, but it also meant regulating ministers, and the promotion of ‘united’ congregations. ‘United’ congregations, to the Chief Rabbi and the Board of Deputies, of course, did not mean grouping the immigrants together – it meant bringing them as much as possible under the same roof as integrated Jews. ‘Unity’ as David Cesarani has argued, thus became an anglicising device and ‘a death sentence on the chevras’.<sup>30</sup>

Matters were not helped by the fact that the incumbent Chief Rabbi, Hermann Adler,<sup>31</sup> who was born in Hanover and educated in England, felt that the new immigrants ‘posed a challenge to the English way of life’ that he represented and ‘by their very presence, they constituted an affront to the Adlerian way of Judaism, and an assault upon the acculturative tendencies promoted so vigorously by those who felt themselves privileged to lead the community in the post-emancipation era’.<sup>32</sup> In return, Adler’s authority and repute, and particularly on matters regarding *shechita*, were held in contempt by religious immigrants, such as those in Dundee, who were alienated from what Alderman calls ‘Adlerian Judaism’.<sup>33</sup> Adler, and by extension, Anglo-Jewish norms as represented in the office of the Chief Rabbi, was too ‘native’ and Anglicised for the new immigrants. As a consequence, the ‘transformation of chevra into synagogue thus usually involved a communal conflict over the control of shechita, usually ending in the Great Synagogue’s favour, although not without a lengthy battle, by the intervention of the chief Rabbi.’<sup>34</sup>

On 19 February 1883, A. Rosenfield and Hyman Levi of the Ward Street synagogue wrote to the Chief Rabbi requesting a *shochet*. They already had a candidate in mind, but in line with the contemporary practice of securing the Chief Rabbi’s approval even when a potential incumbent had been found independently, they wanted Adler’s permission to appoint him.<sup>35</sup>

We have the pleasure to inform you that we are about to inaugurate a congregation in this town. The congregation is existing for some time, and we are desirous to approve it by engaging a minister shochet and being acquainted with a Mr Rabinovich residing at 8 George Street, London, a native of Kovno, who is willing to accept our situation on our terms, we beg that you examine him and send him to us as soon as possible.<sup>36</sup>

On the very same date, S. Fridman<sup>37</sup> of the Bank Street congregation wrote a similar letter.

Having been suffering for the past three years for want of a *Sheichet* and as there are thirty three of our Polish Jews resident here...it was very hard to get supplied with *cosher* meat therefore we would feel very glad if you would kindly send us one immediately, if you have one at hand, we can't afford to pay very much but we will undertake to pay him wages and set him up in some suitable premises.<sup>38</sup>

Having learned of Fridman's letter, Rosenfield and Levi wrote again to the Chief Rabbi: 'We have received information, that you have received an opposing letter from a man in the name of Fridman residing in Dundee to the effect that we wish a *shochet* for the salary of 25/- per week.' They then proceed to impugn his character, in clear contradiction of the halachic prohibition against *lashon hara* (Hebrew: lit. 'evil tongue' but referring to malicious gossip):

We beg to inform you that it is quite unfounded, the said Fridman is of a mischievous character, and has neither self-regard nor regard for others. He married in Dundee some four years ago, and not applied to your reverency [sic] for a *ketubah* [marriage certificate], and has also acted as a minister at the marriages of his brother and of his sister in law to another young man, which took place at his residence and under his control on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> day

of Dec [sic], 1882 respectively; so judging from this you may imagine that he is a man of no principle. If he did use our names in the letter he wrote to you on our behalf he committed [sic] forgery.

They reiterate their request to send their preferred candidate as soon as possible and to ignore Fridman's letters which are 'merely fabrications'.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, S. Fridman and C. Goldstein wrote back to Adler. They stressed that their congregation was superior in numbers and blamed the schism on Rosenfield and Levi, adding the choice piece of gossip that 'Mr Rosenthal, a tailor by trade about 50 years of age, came to this town from London leaving a wife and family behind him, and now lives here with a *bat nozri* [Christian woman].'<sup>40</sup> A. Rosenfield and Hyman Levi replied, suggesting that the Fridman's behaviour was the result of being refused membership because of his 'mischievous behaviour as he was the cause of breaking up the last congregation some 4 years ago.' They even alleged that Goldstein [sic] was merely a visitor to Dundee whose signature was forged.<sup>41</sup>

Lacking a *shochet*, the Chief Rabbi advised them to take beef from Glasgow but this was only a short term and unsatisfactory solution that did not appease the Jewish residents of Dundee. Rosenfield and Levi wrote to Adler, asking

But what are we to do? Are we to starve, with our families, for the want of meat? To send for meat in Glasgow or elsewhere is almost impossible on account of inconveniency for sometimes it comes when it is ... sometimes the butcher neglects to obtain the ... *chatimah* [signature] of the minister on the meat. For the butchers in Scotland are all gentiles.<sup>42</sup>

Acknowledging that 'we are entitled to get a *shochet* from you merely for appreciating your authority', they also point out that that 'we could get scores of *shochetim* from Poland, but we would not do it without your sanction.'<sup>43</sup> Rosenfield and Levi thus demonstrate respect for

the Chief Rabbi's authority to which they defer in this matter. However, in the absence of a response from Adler, four days later, they wrote again begging for a *shochet*.<sup>44</sup> Frustrated by the Chief Rabbi's silence and seeming indifference, and after having acknowledged his authority, Rosenfield and Levi[e] decided to take matters into their own hands by paying for an advert in *The Jewish Chronicle*. It read 'Shochet wanted by the Dundee Hebrew Congregation' [sic].<sup>45</sup> The terms were 8 s. per week, but 'which may be increased under circumstances, as also some perquisites will be granted. Single man preferred.'<sup>46</sup> It is not clear whether the Chief Rabbi saw this advert or not, but the next communiqué from Rosenfield and Levi appeared to justify their decision to appeal for a *shochet* through the pages of *The Jewish Chronicle*. 'It is quite impossible for us to obtain meat from Glasgow suitable for human consumption during the summer even if we were to pass unnoticed the great inconvenience attending it.'<sup>47</sup> They again led with Adler to send a *shochet*, and expressed surprise at his 'continued silence' in the face of their repeated requests.<sup>48</sup>

Eventually heeding their requests, the Chief Rabbi finally appointed Hirsch Levy to fill the position of *shochet* for the Bank Street synagogue. Adler then apparently communicated this information to Friedman who, once of Bank Street, had in the meantime switched sides to the Ward Street congregation, joining Rosenfield and Levi. Friedman concealed the letter and then proceeded to meet the *shochet* at Perth station, before Levy could arrive in Dundee. He then took Levy to his own house, having poached him from under the noses of the Bank Street congregation of which he was once a part!<sup>49</sup> A correspondent, Benjamin Cohen, whose allegiance is unknown, informed the Chief Rabbi: 'The parties remain asunder much the same as before: the *shochet* is undecided he is a half afraid and a half willing to remain in Dundee, but awaits your pleasure.'<sup>50</sup> Cohen then wrote a further letter to the Chief Rabbi, questioning his judgement and the wisdom of the timing of sending Levy to Dundee before the two synagogues' dispute had been resolved. 'The

detention of Mr Levy was considered necessary by a very grave difficulty which arose when your intentions to send a *shochet* for all became known and the question in which synagogue the expected *shochet* should officiate and it is questionable whether it would have been advisable to send a *shochet* at all had this point remained unsettled.<sup>51</sup>

Hirsch Levy then added his own voice to the mix: ‘the fact is this[,] the few Jews that are here are still divided and are a very disagreeable lot [...] They keep finding fault with me and quarrelling. I am sick and tired of them and I am sure I can do better in London.’<sup>52</sup> In July, Levy wrote again, complaining of bad treatment and of being ‘obliged to take lodgings in a Christian house.’ He also claimed that he was threatened with a knife. He wrote further,

The two brothers Levy are a bad lot. They have raised rows in the *shule* on Shabbat. The *parnas* [warden] is obliged to have the police at the door during service which is disgraceful if it had not been for the sake of *chillul hashem* [desecration of God’s name] it would have been a very heavy trial before the court of justice.<sup>53</sup>

Levi and Rosenfield then complained to the Chief Rabbi, again implicitly questioning his judgement. ‘We regret to state that the minister you sent us this past 6 months behaves very bad [sic]. He ruins our small congregation. He does not discharge his duty. He goes about with slander and causes great mischief.’<sup>54</sup> Levy again wrote to Adler, complaining about the ‘quarrelsome set’ at Ward Street, where he has been insulted and physically abused.<sup>55</sup>

Having fallen out with the Ward Road congregation and of which he had had enough, Levy defected to the ‘opposition’ synagogue in Bank Street, the very one he was originally meant to serve. He subsequently asked for the Chief Rabbi’s permission to switch congregations, after having already done so.<sup>56</sup> Levy begged Adler to ‘please consider my case today if possible as am distressed and destitute.’<sup>57</sup> Hyman Levi then received a letter from a solicitor engaged by Hirsch Levy to recover his unpaid salary. Again, looking to the Chief Rabbi for guidance, Hyman Levi stated that he did not want to take the issue to a civil

court as it would be a *chillul hashem* and would prefer the Chief Rabbi's judgement on the matter, what he called a '*din torah*' (Torah judgement).<sup>58</sup>

Seeking a seemingly impartial voice on the events in Dundee, the Chief Rabbi contacted Benjamin Cohen. Showing the promise of complete submission to the authority of the Chief Rabbi on this matter, Cohen informed Adler that 'The *shochet* has been tolerated so long simply because *you* sent him, and therefore if you think it desirable he should remain, the *kehillah* [congregation] will (for the above said reason) undoubtedly submit.' At the same time, he pointed out that Levy was a poor choice:

because he is altogether ignorant of the most common duties attached to the office of reader in a provincial town, is totally devoid of common sense, and therefore easily led away. The present painful disagreement never, would have occurred, but for this weakness and is given to the habit of clashing, by which old differences are kept alive and new ones created.<sup>59</sup>

As this letter shows, but is true of the correspondence in general, the key protagonists frequently reiterate the fact that it was Adler who sent Levy to Dundee and hence they were very critical of his judgement in this instance. A. Rosenfield, for example, referred to 'the deplorable behaviour of the *chazzan* [cantor] you sent us...he is the cause of many a dispute here owing to the people with which he associates.'<sup>60</sup> Levy was expected to perform such duties in addition to butchering the meat. Levy's alleged ineptitude at these extra tasks, and the fact that he did not expect to have to undertake them, formed a major part of the grievances held by the congregations against him. Yet, at the same time, the Jews of Dundee were still willing to look to the Chief Rabbi for guidance and to defer to his judgement nevertheless.

The matter ended up in court when Levy, now of Bank Street, sued the Ward Road synagogue for his unpaid wages. The Chief Rabbi sided with the *shochet* against his former

congregation, providing him with an interpreter (setting a precedent that would later be taken up in Aberdeen in the following decade).<sup>61</sup> The Ward Road synagogue offered payment of the money (£3 or four weeks' salary) on condition that Levy resumed his duties. The sheriff felt that the offer was fair and advised Levy to accept, which it was understood at the time, he did.<sup>62</sup> Yet, the court settlement did not end the dispute. Lewis Friedman of Bank Street wrote to Adler after the court case.

It seems to me you are labouring under a mistake in in [sic] thinking that he would be better where you want him, as our congregation are of one mind concerning him and he himself wishes to come with us. I am certain it would be to our mutual good for him to accept our pastorage. It is certain that through time the other party will join with us as they are quite unable to keep him and are only doing so through pure spite.<sup>63</sup>

The Bank Street congregation was not willing to wait for the Chief Rabbi's ruling and took Levy without Adler's permission.<sup>64</sup>

Hyman Levi then informed Adler 'that we have decided to dispense with his services weather [sic] you recall him or not.'<sup>65</sup> He then expressed his surprise at Adler's decision to send Levy back to Dundee, warning the Chief Rabbi:

I must ask if you really desire a *kehillah* in Dundee not to send him. I can assure you if you defer sending a *shochet* here for a single fortnight the result will be a general peace [...] Should you persist in sending Levy here Dundee will never have the chance of being numbered among the *kehillot* of this Empire...<sup>66</sup>

He then followed up with

Regarding your assertion that if there is any further trouble in Dundee you will hold me and my followers responsible. I consider it my duty to inform

you that if such a thing happens *you* and nobody else will be answerable for if you had taken the trouble to ascertain who was right and who was wrong [Hirsch] Levy would never again had had the chance of troubling Dundee. Anyway we intend ignoring him. We do not intend troubling him he will have more than enough without us. I hope I will have no occasion to trouble you for sometime [sic].<sup>67</sup>

Levi clearly blamed the Chief Rabbi for the troubles. ‘We need scarcely to remind you that the return of Mr. H. Levy as pastor to Dundee was entirely against our will: to our mind it is as clear as day light, that he should never been sent back here, and what is more we think you know it as well as we do’.<sup>68</sup> ‘It is highly probable had you not held Mr Levy [...] over Dundee peace might have been established but as it was the [...] came to nothing.’<sup>69</sup> Levi states his belief that Levy was not fit for ‘an English community’ because ‘he is ignorant of the most common duties attached to the offices of *shochet* in a provincial town’, namely the expectation that he was expected to perform other obligations in addition to butchering the meat. Levi concluded, ‘and concerning his treatment of us he should never have been sent back. This is a fact patent to all...’<sup>70</sup> Ignoring Adler’s writ, Levi and Rosenfield refused to eat meat killed by Levy and, in clear contravention of his attempt at centralised control over *shechita*, imported a *shochet* from Russia without his explicit sanction. The Bank Street synagogue appealed to Adler to put a stop to this situation.<sup>71</sup>

A compromise was ultimately achieved. The factions were reconciled to form a single congregation that worshipped together in the same building on 7 Ward Road thereafter.<sup>72</sup> The Bank Street location, which appears to have been Fridman’s home, was no longer used as a place of worship. However, it is not exactly clear how this process occurred, frustrated by the fact that the lack of extant documentation means that the Chief Rabbi’s actual responses are still unknown. The Archives contain the correspondence from the



communities but in the pre-carbon copy age – the correspondence was all hand-written – they do not contain the Chief Rabbi’s replies, which cannot be located in the records of Dundee’s synagogues either, as they have been lost. In their absence, two contradictory accounts exist. In its report of the occasion, the *Jewish Chronicle* suggested that the Chief Rabbi’s visit to Dundee in July 1892 was the factor that led to the reuniting of the Jews of Dundee: ‘As a result of the Chief Rabbi’s visit to Dundee, a union has been effected among the Jews of that town.’<sup>73</sup> However, given his lack of authority in this and other matters, that conclusion seems highly doubtful. Consequently, we may turn to David Jacob’s description of events: ‘the Chief Rabbi of Britain was so delighted that these remote members of his community had finally behaved in such a mature way that he insisted on attending the shul’s dedication and preached an uplifting sermon extolling them.’<sup>74</sup> Again, however, the problem here is that the new synagogue, which was located at 132 Murraygate, was not opened until August 1895 and no mention of the Chief Rabbi being in attendance was made.<sup>75</sup> Most likely, in its desire for the status of ‘a properly constituted synagogue’, the community itself decided to acknowledge Chief Rabbinate’s authority because, by locating itself within its orbit, greater prestige was gained.<sup>76</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Although the spat was short-lived, this story of the rival congregations in Dundee, sparked by the issue of a *shochet*, is not only fascinating in its own right, but gives a superb insight into the relationship between a frontier community on the periphery and the centre of British-Jewish life to which it pleaded for intercession, as well as the operation, effective or otherwise, of the Chief Rabbinate in London.

The crisis reveals that the relationship between centre and periphery/frontier stood somewhere between the highly centralised Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, and the

fragmented, autonomous Presbyterian churches at the other end of the spectrum. Michael Goulston, Bill Williams and Miri Freud-Kandel have all suggested that the Chief Rabbinate attempted to resemble the vertical and centralised structure of the Church of England with the United Synagogue as ‘the church’, the rabbinate as the ‘clergy’ and the Chief Rabbi as its ‘Archbishop’.<sup>77</sup> Cloaking himself, literally, in Anglican garb, Adler certainly saw himself in this light, as the sole religious authority of the entire British Empire, which he regarded as a single community, presided over by one rabbi – himself.<sup>78</sup> Under his watch, the periphery communities were ‘expected to move in orbits marked out for them in London’.<sup>79</sup> Pastoral visits by the Chief Rabbi to the frontier communities were one of the means of achieving this. However, one cannot underestimate the impact of the demographic revolution in British Jewry which hit at precisely the point that the Dundee *shechita* crisis occurred. Adler was desperate to maintain his control and authority in the midst of the turmoil and turbulence that the influx of more religious Jews from Eastern Europe had caused not least because some of the larger provincial communities contained prominent ‘rabbinical scholars of high repute, trained in the *yeshivot* [Hebrew: academies of Jewish higher learning] of Russia, Lithuania, and Poland’ who being ‘fully competent, in the eyes of orthodox Jewry, to authorize marriages and divorces, and to license *shochetim*’ could, potentially, challenge his authority.<sup>80</sup> It should also be remembered that the Dundee crisis occurred against a backdrop of liturgical and ritual reform that ‘was proving increasingly contentious as the century wound down’.<sup>81</sup>

While Adler attempted to impose control, fearing the sort of religious fragmentation that, in the absence of centralisation characterised the United States, the distance of Dundee from London perhaps allowed a measure of autonomy in the administration of the frontier of Jewish communal life. It could be argued that, owing to the community’s small size and lack of finance and status, Dundee’s Jews perhaps had no choice but to look to London for

leadership and guidance on the matter of *shechita* thereby conceding some authority on it. On the other hand, however, a frontier community like Dundee on the periphery of British Jewish life did not really have to seek a London approved *shochet*, but rather did so out of choice, as manifested by the fact that, at one point, it either imported, or threatened to import, an unlicensed/unapproved *shochet*. Thus, we see a gradual process by which a peripheral community like Dundee on the frontier gradually sought improved status and legitimacy by bringing itself under the authority of the Chief Rabbi. The episode illustrates how an immigrant frontier community on the periphery was trying to bring itself closer to the centre by participating in a wider process of seeking legitimacy and status by coming under, or at least attempting to come under, the authority of the British Jewish establishment. As Williams put it, ‘Immigrant chevroth, any one of which might have served to perpetuate new levels of Orthodox observance, were thus effectively sucked into the mainstream by the ambition of their leading members.’<sup>82</sup> Rather than illustrating an out-and-out rebellion against the authority of the centre, therefore, it seems rather that this episode reveals the nuanced, ambivalent, and often chaotic (if not comical) nature of immigrant approaches to this process.

In direct contrast was the attitude of the centre. At times, Adler seemed uninterested, wishing the issue would go away. While the periphery was making at least *some* attempts to bring itself into the ‘mainstream’, it was often met not with accommodation but with indifference. This leads one to ask the questions: would Adler have been more active in trying to solve these issues if it was a dispute between an established community and an immigrant one, rather than one between immigrants and would he have been more interested if this dispute was happening in London or Manchester? This apparent indifference is significant because it runs counter to some suggestions from the ‘New School’ of British-Jewish historiography that established Anglo-Jewry was, at that time, quite powerful and

influential within the community and further that it subtly or overtly used this power and influence to encourage integration and Anglicisation. This might have been the case in the centre – London – and/or the major urban communities, where the philanthropy of those like Montefiore could be put to such uses – but in this incident, Adler appears neither as powerful, nor influential, and he seems to have little concern about Jewish life in Dundee beyond the perfunctory regional visit. If anything, Adler’s authority seems to emanate only from the willingness of various peripheral congregations to grant him a say in their affairs. Unfortunately, however, the centre’s perception of events, or any expression of its own aims or interests in this affair, is absent in that Adler’s responses have been lost, not being located in any existing archive.

In the final analysis, therefore, Dundee, perhaps owing to its small size and lack of finance and status, looked to London for leadership. But, in its perceived absence, as when such guidance was not forthcoming – indeed, Adler’s actions exacerbated rather than calmed the situation, demonstrating Alderman’s observation that ‘A wiser man, knowing his own intellectual limitations, would have acted with circumspection and diplomacy’<sup>83</sup> – its members simply went ahead and behaved in a somewhat autonomous fashion. Frontier communities on the periphery could have it both ways: congregations outside the United Synagogue frequently requested the Chief Rabbi’s advice while ignoring his solicitations for contributions to his Fund.<sup>84</sup>

A ‘strong organizational framework that centralized authority’ may have been desired by the centre but its effectiveness in practice is questioned by the Dundee case.<sup>85</sup> ‘As Delegate Chief Rabbi in the 1880s Hermann had become an object of ridicule and contempt among the immigrants’, observed Alderman. ‘Their hostility to him was specifically directed at the religious role he arrogated to himself, and became focussed initially upon his superintendence of the requirements as to *kosher* meat and poultry’.<sup>86</sup> This unusual cache of

letters certainly seems to bear out Alderman's observations, as well as Gilman's claim that the frontier is a space defined 'by a constant sense of confrontation at the margin.'<sup>87</sup>

### Biographical Note:

Nathan Abrams is a Professor in Film at Bangor University. He is the author of *Caledonian Jews: A Study of Seven Small Communities in Scotland* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009) and most recently 'Remotely Jewish: Scotland's Seven Small Jewish Communities' in Kenneth Collins, Aubrey Newman and Bernard Wasserstein (eds.), *Two Hundred Years of Scottish Jewry* (Glasgow: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, 2018), 159-178.

---

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sander L Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers: Essays on Bodies, Histories, and Identities* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, 15).
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>3</sup> The list is too long to cite here save for the most recent: Jasmine Donahaye, *Whose People? Wales, Israel, Palestine* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012); Cai Parry-Jones, *The Jews of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> One of the reasons for this is the simple lack of extant documentation. The records of many of the smaller and defunct communities have simply been lost. Thus, the difficulty of researching such communities is the incomplete nature of its records. In their absence, we turn to the extant documentation which, unfortunately, is itself only partial.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Israel Feinstein, *Studies and Profiles in Anglo-Jewish History 1800-2000* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002), 231.
- <sup>6</sup> Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2002), 12.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); Vivian D Lipman, *Social History of the Jews in England 1850-1950* (London: Watts, 1954); Vivian D Lipman, *A History of the Jews in Britain since 1858* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990); Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in England* (3rd edn., Oxford: John Trotter, 1964); Cecil Roth, *The Rise of Provincial Jewry: The Early History of the Jewish Communities in the English Countryside* (London: Jewish Monthly, 1950); Geoffrey Alderman, *Controversy and Crisis: Studies in the History of the Jews in Modern Britain* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2008).
- <sup>8</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 119.
- <sup>9</sup> Bill Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry, 1740-1875* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.
- <sup>11</sup> Roth, *The Rise of Provincial Jewry*, 253.
- <sup>12</sup> There had been a Jewish presence in Dundee for some time before that. For example, as early as 1813, there was a court case involving Cohen vs. Magistrates of Dundee, National Archives of Scotland, CS234/C/14/5. For a fuller discussion of the early history of the Dundee Hebrew Congregation, see Nathan Abrams, *Caledonian Jews: A Study of Seven Small Communities in Scotland* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009) and

- 
- Nathan Abrams, 'Jute, Journalism, Jam and Jews: The Anomalous Survival of the Dundee Hebrew Congregation', *Northern Scotland*, 3 (2012): 86–97.
- <sup>13</sup> 'The Fowk at the Fit o' the Hill', *Dundee Courier and Advertiser*, 26 February 1965; Janice Murray and David Stockdale, *The Miles Tae Dundee: Stories of a City and Its People* (Dundee: Dundee Art Galleries & Museums, 1990), 26, 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Suzanne Audrey, 'Glasgow Jewry', in her *Multiculturalism in Practice: Irish, Jewish, Italian and Pakistani Migration to Scotland* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 47.
- <sup>15</sup> Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870–1914*, 92; Murray and Stockdale, *The Miles Tae To Dundee*, 27; Neil Robertson, ed., *An A-Z of Hilltown: A History of Dundee's First Suburb* (Dundee: Grey Lodge, 1994), 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Plural: *chevrot*. Bill Williams defines a *chevra* as '[s]mall society set up by Jewish immigrants, usually in a private house, to serve as a place of worship, a social centre and a place from which newcomers might expect advice and financial help. Its affairs would typically be conducted in Yiddish.' Bill Williams, *Jewish Manchester: An Illustrated History*. (Derby: Breedon, 2008), 189.
- <sup>17</sup> This information is taken from <http://www.dundee.gov.uk/photodb/index.html>. Last accessed April 2012.
- <sup>18</sup> Miri J Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913: An Ideology Forsaken* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 17.
- <sup>19</sup> Albert Jacob, *The Day it Hit the Fan* (unpublished ms. in author's possession), 285; 'The Duties and Wages of a Jewish Pastor', *Dundee Courier*, 6 November 1883; Kenneth Collins, ed., *Aspects of Scottish Jewry* (Glasgow: Glasgow Jewish Representative Council, 1987), 37; Salis Daiches, 'The Jew in Scotland', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 3 (1929), 208.
- <sup>20</sup> According to the *Dundee Directory, 1882–83*, 8 Bank Street was the home of S. Fridman, one of the chief protagonists in the dispute.
- <sup>21</sup> Williams, *Jewish Manchester*, 40.
- <sup>22</sup> Much of the following information is derived from letters between the various parties in Dundee and the Chief Rabbi held at the Archives of the Office of the Chief Rabbi and the United Synagogue, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter 'LMA'), RG-ACC/2805/4/2/37 and ACC/2805/2/1/49, where the full correspondence relating to this dispute is located. However, the file contains so much confusing and conflicting information that it is hard to ascertain the precise facts of just how many congregations there were, when they were formed, and how many members each had. The lack of headed synagogue notepaper, the use of private and business headed paper, poor spelling and orthography, and the present unavailability of the Chief Rabbi's responses only confuses the situation.
- <sup>23</sup> See Alderman, *Controversy and Crisis*, 115; Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 152.
- <sup>24</sup> Williams, *Jewish Manchester*, 64.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> Kenneth Collins, 'A Community on Trial: The Aberdeen Shechita Case, 1893', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2010), 77.
- <sup>27</sup> Cecil Roth, *Essays and Portraits in Anglo-Jewish History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1962), 253.
- <sup>28</sup> Williams, *Jewish Manchester*, 65.
- <sup>29</sup> Alderman, *Controversy and Crisis*, 115–7; Williams, *Jewish Manchester*, 65. See also Albert M Hyamson, *The London Board for Shechita 1804-1954* (London: The London Board for Shechita, 1954).
- <sup>30</sup> David Cesarani, *The Jewish Chronicle and Anglo-Jewry, 1841–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77.
- <sup>31</sup> By 1880, as the Chief Rabbi, Nathan Marcus Adler (1803–1890), was no longer able to continue his public and communal duties, his son Hermann was appointed Delegate Chief Rabbi 'to attend at his Office on his behalf, to issue Authorisations of Marriage, to represent him at the Court of the *Beth HaMedrash* and at the meetings of the *Board of Shechita*, and generally to take charge of matters of detail requiring immediate attention in his absence.' Yet the Chief Rabbi's retirement did not end his interest in communal and every important question was still submitted to him. His secretary regularly reported on correspondence received at the office. Meir Persoff, *Faith Against Reason: Religious Reform and the British Chief Rabbinate, 1840-1990* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), 100.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.
- <sup>33</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 146, 154.
- <sup>34</sup> Williams, *Jewish Manchester*, 65.
- <sup>35</sup> Aubrey Newman, 'The Chief Rabbinate and the Provinces, 1840–1914', in Jonathan Sacks, ed., *Tradition and Transition: Essays Presented to Chief Rabbi Sir Immanuel Jakobovits to celebrate twenty years in office* (London: Jews' College, 1986), 219.
- <sup>36</sup> A. Rosenfield & H. Levi to Adler, 19 February 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.

- 
- <sup>37</sup> Often, variant spellings are given for what can be ascertained to be the same people, e.g. Fridman and Friedman.
- <sup>38</sup> S. Fridman to Adler, 19 February 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>39</sup> A Rosenfield & H Levi to Adler, 2 March 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>40</sup> S. Fridman & C. Goldstein to Adler, no date, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>41</sup> A Rosenfield & Hyman Levi to Adler, 4 March 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>42</sup> A. Rosenfield & H Levi to Adler, 11 March 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>43</sup> A. Rosenfield & H Levi to Adler, 11 March 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>44</sup> A Rosenfield & H. Levi to H. Adler, 15 March 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>45</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 16 March 1883.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>47</sup> A. Rosenfield & H Levi to Adler, 27 March 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> B. Cohen to Adler, 8 April 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>50</sup> B. Cohen to Adler, 8 April 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>51</sup> Benjamin Cohen to Adler, 2 May 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>52</sup> Hirsch Levy to Adler, 4 June 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>53</sup> Hirsch Levy to Adler, 9 July 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>54</sup> H. Levi & A. Rosenfield, 15 October 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>55</sup> Hirsch Levy to Adler, 15 October 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> Hersch Levi to Adler, 18 October 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>58</sup> Hyman Levi to Adler, 17 October 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>59</sup> B. Cohen, 55 Victoria Road, to Adler, 24 October 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>60</sup> Hyman Levi to Adler, 13 November 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>61</sup> Court case, Dundee Small Debt Course, 6 November 1883, reported in ‘Action for Salary by a Hebrew Pastor’, newspaper clipping, source unknown, n.d., ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA. As far as I can tell, none of this was reported in the *Jewish Chronicle*.
- <sup>62</sup> *The Dundee Courier & Argus*, 10 November 1883; *The Dundee Courier & Argus and Northern Warder* 13 November 1883; *The Dundee Courier & Argus*, 14 November 1883; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 10 November 1883.
- <sup>63</sup> Lewis Friedman, to Adler, 23 November 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>64</sup> Lewis Freidman to Adler, 7 January 1884, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>65</sup> H. Levi to Adler, 6 December 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>66</sup> H. Levie to Adler, 29 December 1883, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>67</sup> Hyman Levi and followers to H. Adler 19 January 1884, ACC/2805/2/1/49, LMA.
- <sup>68</sup> H. Levi to Adler, 11 March 1884, ACC/2805/2/1/62, LMA.
- <sup>69</sup> H. Levi to Adler, 11 March 1884, ACC/2805/2/1/62, LMA.
- <sup>70</sup> H. Levi to Adler, 18 March 1884, ACC/2805/2/1/62, LMA.
- <sup>71</sup> David Ross to Adler, 19 March 1884, ACC/2805/2/1/62.
- <sup>72</sup> This information is derived from the *Dundee Directory*, 1892–1895, with the exception of 1893/94, when 50 Barrack Street is listed. The *Jewish Chronicle* also reported on 3/5/93 that the congregation’s annual meeting was held at the ‘Synagogue Chambers, Ward Road’.
- <sup>73</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 22 July 1892.
- <sup>74</sup> Jacob, ‘The Day it Hit the Fan’, 285–6.
- <sup>75</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 6 September 1895; *Jewish Chronicle*, 28 August 1895; *The Dundee Courier & Argus*, 29 August 1895. See also the *Dundee Directory*, 1895–98.
- <sup>76</sup> Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry*, 60, 61.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 193; Michael Goulston, ‘The Status of the Anglo-Jewish Rabbinate, 1840–1914’, *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 10, no. 2 (June 1968): 55–82; Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913*.
- <sup>78</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 144.
- <sup>79</sup> Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry*, 339.
- <sup>80</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 144.
- <sup>81</sup> Persoff, *Faith Against Reason*, 101.
- <sup>82</sup> Williams, *Jewish Manchester*, 57.
- <sup>83</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 147.
- <sup>84</sup> Newman, *Essays and Portraits*, ‘The Chief Rabbinate and the Provinces’, 222.
- <sup>85</sup> Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913*, 3.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 14
- <sup>87</sup> Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*, 15–16.