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Three Anglo-Jewish Portraits and Their Legacy for Today: Moses Marcus, the Convert; Abraham Tang, the Radical *Maskil*; David Levi, the Defender of Judaism

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Abstract

My fascination with Anglo-Jewish history emerged by chance, but has been profound enough for me to write two books on the subject. My appreciation of the richness, diversity and significance of the history of Jewish cultural history on English soil continues to grow and deepen. There is a long tradition of Jewish historical writing, exemplified by the work of the Jewish Historical Society of England. But modern historians have barely begun to take pre-twentieth century Anglo-Jewish history seriously. The drama of modernity seems still to be regarded as a German story, beginning with Mendelssohn and continuing into Eastern Europe. Historians such as Todd Engelman and David Katz have made major contributions to our subject, but in so doing have sometimes revealed their own biases.

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*Three Anglo-Jewish Portraits and
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the Convert; Abraham Tang, the
Radical Maskil; David Levi,
the Defender of Judaism*¹

DAVID RUDERMAN

My fascination with Anglo-Jewish history emerged by chance, but has been profound enough for me to write two books on the subject. My appreciation of the richness, diversity and significance of the history of Jewish cultural history on English soil continues to grow and deepen. There is a long tradition of Jewish historical writing, exemplified by the work of the Jewish Historical Society of England. But modern historians have barely begun to take pre-twentieth-century Anglo-Jewish history seriously. The drama of modernity seems still to be regarded as a German story, beginning with Mendelssohn and continuing into Eastern Europe. Historians such as Todd Endelman and David Katz have made major contributions to our subject, but in so doing have sometimes revealed their own biases.

We are often told that Anglo-Jews lack intellectual traditions, that intellectual history was for them of little importance, and even that the process of their modernization is a social history of unconscious assimilation and acculturation. I disagree. I wish to argue for the independent drama of Anglo-Jewish history in modern times, for the relevance and significance of this history for modern Jews, especially those in the British Isles and in America, and for the idea that the Jews of England were also thinkers, as well as merchants and craftsman. It seems to me, moreover, that their articulations of Jewish identity are relevant to our own self-understanding and self-fashioning.

The portraits of three British Jews who lived in the eighteenth

¹ An extended version of this paper was presented in London as a Catherine Lewis Public Lecture, 3 June 2008.

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century that I wish to offer here are presented more fully in my two books on Anglo-Jewry.² What appears here is therefore only a brief summary of my more extensive treatments of them there. I selected these individuals in particular because their lives, achievements and struggles, as well as the colour and diversity of their interests and their complex relationships to Judaism, are of compelling interest to a biographer. In writing about them, and in using the title 'Anglo-Jewish portraits', I am admitting a debt to Cecil Roth. Several years ago I gave his memorial lecture and expressed admiration for his ability to spot the unusual and the uncanny, and to tell Jewish history for the sheer joy of the telling and for transmitting human drama. His excitement for Italian and well as for British Jewish history is infectious. But I am also an historian in search of a usable past. Jewish history is a conduit in our own search for who we are and what we stand for. Without our history, we stand naked before the immediate.

The subject of my first portrait is Moses Marcus, who converted to the Anglican Church in 1723 and published a book to justify his apostasy. His mother was Freudchen, the daughter of Glückel of Hameln and his father, Marcus Moses, also known as Mordecai Hamburger (c. 1660–1735), the richest Jew in England.

Mordecai, a precious-stones dealer from Hamburg who moved to London on his marriage in 1699, was unimpressed by the local rabbinical leadership and sought to set up his own synagogue in his home, close to the existing Ashkenazi and Sephardi synagogues, despite the slight this implied. He gained further notoriety in 1706 by challenging the legality of a conditional divorce granted by the chief rabbi to a rival trader who was so deeply in debt that he was planning to flee to the West Indies. The divorce, which was designed to free the wife to remarry should the husband not return, outraged Mordecai Hamburger, who had no talmudic training, but who saw this as supporting a man about to default on his debts. When Hamburger protested he was put under a ban which might have ruined him, since it prevented anyone in the Jewish community from talking to him. This brought shame not only on Jews of London, but on those of Hamburg, so

² David Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000) and idem, *Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2007).

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German rabbis became involved, pronouncing the ban illegal. The ban was eventually overturned, but Hamburger's adventures were not over. A few years later he lost his fortune and left for Madras in 1712, returning in 1721 still a wealthy man and rejoining the community he had helped found. This, the second Ashkenazi synagogue in London, was known as the Hambro synagogue, after the place of origin of most of its members.

His eldest son, Moses Marcus, was sent during his father's absence to study in a yeshivah in Hamburg. There he encountered by chance Anglican missionaries, who were obviously motivated to win over this trophy child for the Church by his parents' status. His mentor in the process of his conversion was a formidable Hebraic and Latin scholar of Prussian origin who had been born David Wilcke (1685–1745), but who, after he reached England in 1712, called himself Wilkins, and became successively librarian at Lambeth Palace and chaplain to William Wake, Archbishop of Canterbury (1657–1737), himself formerly at Christ Church, Oxford.

The circumstances of his conversion were complex. He wrote to his parents and told them he loved them and would never convert, whereupon his father sent him to Amsterdam for a year to recover his equilibrium. From there he sued his father for withholding funds for his upkeep, and converted nevertheless. In 1724 he published a book in London entitled *The Principal Motives and Circumstances that Induced Moses Marcus to leave the Jewish, and embrace the Christian Faith with a short Account of his Sufferings thereupon*. This added to his notoriety, since it challenged the well-known defence of the oral law by Haham David Nieto of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Bevis Marks, in his *Matteh Dan* or 'The Rod of Judgment' (published in Hebrew and Spanish in 1714).

Moses apparently emerged from his struggles with his family as a nominal Christian, constantly in search of money and recognition in Christian society, attempting to offer his knowledge of Judaism to any interested Christian student. From then on Moses's life – a window into the world of Jews and Christians at the beginning of the eighteenth century – reveals a liminal space of a convert between two faiths, seeking to secure acceptance in the high Christian society of London.

He barely managed to keep himself and his family by teaching languages and publishing books on Judaism meant for Christian consump-

tion. A begging letter to Sir Hans Sloane, the benefactor of the British Museum, reveals a remarkable network of supporters, patrons and students and offers us a road map into his social network, which includes high churchmen such as Daniel Waterland (1683–1740), Zachary Pearce (1690–1774), Benjamin Hoadly (1676–1761) and others. Marcus wrote a manual on Jewish ceremonies, and in 1729 translated into English the Christian Hebraist Johann Carpzov's *Defence of the Hebrew Bible*, which criticizes William Whiston's rejection of the Jewish version of the Old Testament, and thereby defends the integrity of the biblical text. Here he reveals his dual loyalty – a Christian by faith, but a Jew tied ethnically to his community. His conversion does not dislodge his loyalty to the Hebrew text and to the Jewish people. His story seems to be emblematic of many others who followed similar paths of radical assimilation, but who retained something of their Jewish identity.

My second subject is Abraham ben Naphtali Tang (*d.* 1792), perhaps the most original scholar and thinker in Anglo-Jewry at the end of the eighteenth century. He was a grandson of Abraham ben Moses Taussig Neu-Greschel of Prague, who signed his name using the initials of his surname and place of origin – hence 'Tang'. His son settled in London and married the daughter of R. Nathan Apta of Opatow, rabbi of the Hambro synagogue. His teacher was Moses Minsk, rabbi of Hevrat Sha'arei Zion in London.

Tang has been hardly studied, although the late Sidney Leperer devoted a doctoral dissertation to him. Leperer, who had not seen all of his works, labeled him a *Maskil*, 'proponent of Enlightenment', as Roth had done, and as I do also in my title. But if we mean by that that his thinking was an echo of that current in Germany, the designation is misleading. It would be more accurate to see him as a unique intellectual emerging from the soil of England, writing in Hebrew and in English. His largest work, *Behinat ha-Adam*, is an unfinished discourse on the universality of God based on the writings of the French Protestant Bible scholar Samuel Bochart (1599–1667), the English theologian Edward Stillingfleet (1635–99) and the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704). His translation into Hebrew of Voltaire's 'Chinese Catechism' of 1764 – the entry in his famous philosophical encyclopedia in which he bases faith on reason – was among Tang's most unusual accomplishments. He offers in his Hebrew writing a critique of rabbinic culture and kabbalah.

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His interest in ancient mythology and history and his method of applying these to the study of ancient Judaism and the rabbis were unique. For Tang, the rabbis operated in a political universe, and one must understand their actions accordingly. His Hebrew translation of William Congreve's *Mourning Bride* and the art and diagrams in his manuscripts all add colour to his complex self-portrait as an enlightened Jew.

Among Tang's other works were an English commentary and translation of the ethical tractate of the Mishnah, *Pirke Avot* (1772), together with the commentary by Moses Maimonides; and a pamphlet entitled: *A Discourse Addressed to the Minority* (1770). He attributes the first of these to 'a primitive Ebrew', and sets out to show how Jewish teachings are deist at their core and propound the priority of morality over ceremonial life, assuming the rationality and the primacy of inward duties. The second work is a defence of the English radical John Wilkes (1725-97) and his critique of the undemocratic way in which he was removed from parliament. In publicly identifying with Wilkes he demonstrated an emotional attachment to his British homeland, an argument probably unmatched in the writings of other Jews at that period.

My final portrait is that of a particular hero of mine, David Levi (1740-1801), who made himself the consummate public intellectual and spokesman of London Jewry. From the appearance of his first book in 1782, *A Succinct Account of the Rites and Ceremonies of the Jews*, until the end of the century, he flooded the market with publications in English designed to educate a Jewishly illiterate public and to defend the integrity of Judaism before deists and Christian millenarians alike. These included translations of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi prayer books (1789 and 1794 respectively, but often reissued), a Hebrew grammar (1785-7) and *Dissertations on the Prophecies of the Old Testament* in three volumes (1793 and 1800). In addition he wrote two responses to the attempts of Joseph Priestly (1733-1804) to convert Jews (1787), as well as ripostes to Richard Brothers's (1757-1824) messianic pretensions and to Thomas Paine (1737-1809), the Anglo-American radical (1789, 1797). He was well known in the Christian community and elicited many comments from Christians. His literary friends, such as the bookseller George Lackington (1768-1844), and Henry Lemoine (1756-1812), supported him and praised him as their peer.

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Levi was a conventional traditionalist who supported a version of what we would call Orthodox Judaism, and simultaneously respected orthodox Christians over Unitarians such as Priestly. His defence of Judaism, and especially his attempts to correct what he saw as misrepresentations of the Bible by contemporary Christian translators such as Benjamin Kennicott (1718–83) and Robert Lowth (1710–87), became legendary. Bludgeoning his Christian opponents by ridiculing their tendentious readings of Scripture, he seemed to relish a fight. He could be compared with Jewish public intellectuals such as Menasseh ben Israel (1604–57) in Amsterdam or Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) in Berlin, were it not for the brashness and temerity of his polemical style. While they preferred measured caution, perhaps out of deference to their Christian elite society, Levi, who lived among those with a relatively higher level of tolerance towards its Jewish minority, could abandon inhibitions. He even dared speak on behalf of the English nation as a whole in condemning Thomas Paine. Levi consciously pressed the culture and power-structure of Christian society to allow Jews to take full advantage of the free speech that democracy permits. A philo-Semitic Christian cleric named Anselm Bayly (1718/19–94) complained that Levi had gone too far in his outspokenness, suggesting that toleration implied servility and meekness, rather than brashness and unfettered speech. When Levi broke the rule of being ‘a good Jew’, and became the primary Jewish dissenter of his day, his self-confidence as a public Jew marked a kind of threshold to the modern era.

In the final analysis, these three Anglo-Jews of the eighteenth century—a convert, a deist, and an apologist and educator—offer us a wide and colourful panorama for understanding the diversity, the dynamism and the creativity of Jewish life on English soil. For Jews as well as others, memory has always been ‘redemptive’, that is, by enriching our knowledge of the past, we deepen and ennoble ourselves. And who more than contemporary Jews living in the British Isles could appreciate the complex ambivalence of Moses Marcus shuttling between Christianity and Judaism; or the intellectual excitement of Abraham Tang in the new radical political world he had discovered in London; or the temerity and commitment of David Levi to defend his people and their intellectual legacy at all costs? May their memory be also our blessing!