Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie - Faithfull Freemason

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The Very Reverend Sir Israel Brodie, KBE., BA., BLitt., (1895-1975) Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the British Commonwealth of Nations (1948-65), was an active and energetic freemason and personified British Jewry at its best. His skull-cap, the 'kipa' which he wore on all formal occasions, was made from the same material as his Masonic apron!

The first rabbinical leader of the Jewish community, after the return to England in 1655 under the guidance of the Amsterdam Rabbi Manasseh ben Israel, was Judah Loeb Cohen (1696-1700) and it was not until 1845 that the formal conferment of the title of *Chief Rabbi* took place, when Nathan Marcus Adler (1800-1891) was appointed to that post. The concept of a Chief Rabbi was then unique to England and broadly based on the function and duties of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is in his footsteps and with this rich history behind him, that Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie, the subject of this Masonic biography, followed.

Israel Brodie son of Aaron was born in Newcastle upon Tyne on 10 May 1895 and received his primary education at Rutherford College, in the same city. This followed with higher education at Jews’ College and University College in London and finally at Balliol College, Oxford. In 1917 Israel Brody enlisted in the RAF and served as a Jewish Chaplain to the Forces to the end of the war. In 1921 he worked for social services in the East End of London until an opportunity to move to Australia came up. During Chief Rabbi Dr Joseph Hertz’s visit to Australia in 1921 Rabbi Brodie was recommended and finally appointed to replace Rabbi Dr Joseph Abrahams as chief minister of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation. He served the community from 1923 to 1937. He was the first President of the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand (ZFANZ) established in 1927 to co-ordinate the activities of the State Zionist Councils of Australia under patronage of Sir John Monash. His involvement in the movement was the beginning of several controversies that marked his life. In this instance, in the light of the Jewish aspirations for a homeland in Palestine, he found himself increasingly distanced from his peers, as his objectives came more and more into conflict with British policy and administration in Palestine encountering, in some instances, outright hostility. In 1935 he was appointed to the editorial committee of the influential and revamped *Australian Jewish Herald*, which had first seen the light of day in 1879.

In between times, in 1933, he was initiated into Freemasonry in the Duke of Sussex Lodge No 48 under the Grand Lodge of Victoria and soon joined the Victoria Lodge of Research No 218 of which he became Master. He pursued his Masonic career by being exalted into the Collingwood Chapter in 1935, in which year he was appointed Past Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Victoria. As a minister serving in the new Melbourne Synagogue, which was completed in 1930, the early years were disappointing but soon, as a result of very active efforts by the members of the congregation a flourishing youth group was established, enthusiastic ladies auxiliary met regularly and a large religious school was formed. When Rabbi Israel Brodie, in April 1937, expressed his intention to return to England, everyone felt great disappointment.

Back in England, he applied to teach at Jews' College, London and in 1939 he found himself once more recruited to serve as the Jewish Chaplain to the Army and the RAF. In June 1940, with some 330,000 Allied troops, he was evacuated from Dunkirk by sea to England in *Operation Dynamo*. He finished the War as Senior Jewish Chaplain nicknamed the *Forces Rabbi.* He served in the army until he was made Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth of Nations in 1948. During the whole of this period 1939, to 1948, he was active as a Lecturer and Tutor at Jew’s College, which trains rabbis and teachers and which was later renamed *The London College Of Jewish Studies*.

The Lodge of Israel in London welcomed him on January 25 1944 as a visitor and saluted him as a Past Grand Chaplain of the United Grand Lodge of Victoria. Within two years, on 19 November 1946, the year, incidentally, of his marriage to Fanny Levine, a native of Warsaw, he joined the Montefiore Lodge No 1017, proposed by Bro. Leslie Sober and seconded by Bro. E. Braham. His advancement to the chair was speedy. He was elected Master in November 1948 and installed at the Café Royal in London in February 1949. He was to visit the Lodge of Israel on several later occasions: on January 9th 1958, he was received as *W Bro the V Rev Israel Brody, Chief Rabbi* and was accompanied by R W Bro Max Seligman, Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the State of Israel. He returned again on 28 April 1960 once more accompanied by Max Seligman, now the Most Worshipful Grand Master of Israel.

By now Israel Brodie had been appointed Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the British Commonwealth of Nations and it is not surprising that the Montefiore Lodge attendance book for the day, which has 8 pages added listing 466 guests, including 169 Installed Masters, reads like a Masonic who’s who: the Very Rev. W. Bro. Canon Lancaster, Grand Chaplain; the Very Rev. V. W. Bro. Bishop of Woolwich; W. Bro. Nat Gordon, R.W. Master of Lodge No. 753 Glasgow leading a deputation from Scotland; W. Bro. Saul Taylor, I.P.M.; W. Bro. B. R. Gates and W. Bro. S. Barclay, Past Masters and Bro. I. Hyman, and many other distinguished visitors. The minutes record Bro Brodie’s active participation in Lodge affairs. His talks and orations were already popular and as Master his lecture on *“Four Cardinal Values”* was particularly well received. At the end of his year as Master the Lodge presented with leather bound volume of the Summonses issued during his year in office.

Israel Brodie became Chief Rabbi in 1948 at the age of 53 at a time when Jewry in the world at large was going through a difficult time. The Holocaust in Europe was a sensitive subject and the ending of the British Mandate in Palestine was causing continual unrest in Israel. The choice of Chief Rabbi had fallen on him because he was perceived to be a tolerant man with a faultless English background. He proved himself a persuasive and peaceful negotiator and led the community through this period with pride and dignity. He was the founder of Conference of European Rabbis and through this entity Brodie took a significant part in rebuilding the religious life of European Jewry after the Holocaust. His several pastoral tours to Australia and New Zealand and other parts of the Commonwealth, which were recorded by his wife Fanny, who also kept notes relating to visits to Israel, Ireland, South Africa and the United States of America, strengthened the world wide Jewish community in a quiet but significant manner. Sadly the closing years of his tenure were overshadowed by religious dispute. In 1961 Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs (1920-2006) a renowned scholar of Judaism who has been referred to as *"the greatest Chief Rabbi we never had"* was nominated to be principal of Jews' College. However, one of his many books, “*We Have Reason to Believe”* published in 1957 challenged the traditional view that the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah, were dictated by God, word by word, to Moses on Mount Sinai. As a result Brodie blocked the appointment stating that Jacobs was unfit for the post and prohibited Jacobs from returning to his post at the New West End Synagogue. The incident, known as the *Jacobs Affair* reverberated around the world and the resulting controversy within Orthodox scholarly circles is still alive today.

In 1954 the Very Rev. The Chief Rabbi, W Bro Rabbi Israel Brodie, was honoured by the United Grand Lodge of England with his appointment as Past Grand Chaplain and at the Meeting of the Montefiore Lodge on 28th October, he was presented with the Regalia of the Office of Past Grand Chaplain which included, as mentioned above, a skull cap made from the same blue cloth material as the apron. He wore the ‘kipa’ at all the meetings he attended.

At this time, following on a minor dispute in the Montefiore Lodge in which a candidate proposed by the Bro Brodie was black balled, resulted in a the resignation of several Brethren and the withdrawal from the Lodge of Rabbi Brodie himself for several months.

Brodie’s tenure as Chief Rabbi followed on that on Joseph Herman Hertz (1913-1946) who had also ben a Freemason in the Transvaal, South Africa under Unired Grand Lodge of England attaining the rank of Past District Grand Chaplin though he took no further activity as a mason following his appointment as chief rabbi in 1913. There were several other prominent Rabbis who were active freemasons. The Lodge of Israel No. 205 initiated Rev. Moses?? A. Henry (1800-79), who later became Master of the Lodge. Henry had been headmaster of the Jewish Free School (JFS) in the East End. The

Rev. Dr. Bernard Elzas and the Rev. Marcus Haines, Minister of the New West End Synagogue as well as the Rev. Isaac Goldston were all initiated in the same Lodge. In Lodge Joppa

No. 188, Rev. Israel Levy Lindenthal and The Rev. David de Sola of Bevis Marks were initiated in 1846. The Rev. Aaron Barnett Levy was a Chaplain of the Lodge of Tranquillity (1855-7) and The Rev. Dr. George Joseph Emanuel of Birmingham was initiated in 1861. Also the Rev. Morris Rosenbaum, Past Provincial Grand Chaplain (Northumberland), the Masonic historian was an active freemason as was the Rev Rayehael Levy, father of Elkan D Levy a colleague and close friend whose assistance with this article I am glad to acknowledge here and now.

In 1969 Israel Brodie was made a Knight of the British Empire *"for services to British Jewry"* the first Chief Rabbi to be so honoured and a year later, in 1970 he was made an honorary member of Montefiore Lodge.

Brodie died on 20th February 1979.

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