

### 3 Jewish Adversaries

A significant dimension of Solomon Bennett's life and thought was the complex web of relationships he forged with Jews and Christians alike over almost four decades living in London. What makes the interpersonal feature of his life experience so intriguing is that most of these associations with fellow Jews were negative while those with Christians were generally positive. This is not to say that all his encounters with Christians were constructive or that he totally lacked Jewish friends. But it might be accurate to suggest, given his own testimony, that he felt more appreciated and respected by Christians than by Jews and that his Jewish sense of self was profoundly shaped by these personal impressions. Engaging with Christians in dialogue about their shared and diverging values uniquely enhanced rather than diminished his Jewish identity. In this chapter, I consider Bennett's Jewish adversaries; in the next, his Christian admirers.

Bennett's chief nemesis was the Ashkenazic chief rabbi of London, Solomon Hirschell, who succeeded in generating the fragile and cold relations Bennett experienced with Anglo-Jews in general.<sup>1</sup> Bennett's predicament apparently originated in Berlin, where he first encountered Hirschell's father, the chief rabbi of Berlin, and their meeting did not go well, as Bennett later revealed in a 1807 letter written to his friend David Meldola (already quoted in chapter 1, above). Bennett explains that during his sojourn in Berlin he was in close contact with the "Polaks learned in Torah." During this period, he never imagined that the chief rabbi of Berlin, Zvi Hirsch Berlin,<sup>2</sup> had a son who could hold a rabbinic position. When Bennett became involved in a dispute with several other Jews, he was obliged to appear before the Berlin rabbi but the meeting went poorly, the rabbi was haughty and frightened him, and he subsequently remained distant from him. At that time, he adds, "I saw R. Solomon at his father's home for the first time, but I

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1 On Hirschell, see Jeremy I. Pfeffer, *"From One End of the Earth to the Other": The London Bet Din, 1805–1855, and the Jewish Convicts Transported to Australia* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), index; Raymond Apple, "Solomon Hirschel—'High Priest of the Jews,'" 2006 Rabbi LA Falk Memorial Lecture, Delivered at the Great Synagogue, Sydney, *OzTorah*, <https://oztorah.com/2010/06/solomon-hirschel-high-priest-of-the-jews/>; Hilary L. Rubinstein, "Hirschell [Hirschel, Herschell], Solomon (1762–1842)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, October 8, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13363>; and Cecil Roth, "Rabbi Solomon Hirschell and His Contemporaries," chap. 13 of *History of the Great Synagogue* (1950), available at JCR-UK, <https://www.jewishgen.org/jcr-uk/susser/roth/chthirteen.htm>.

2 On Berlin or Lewin, see Hilary L. Rubinstein, "Lyon, Hart [Hirsch Lewin or Loebel], (1721–1800)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 28, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/17275>.

did not exchange any word with that man.”<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Bennett repeats his point that Hirschell’s venom against him already emerged “still from my abode at Berlin, on account of some trivial dissension befallen between me and his father Rabbi of Berlin. [. . .] [H]e [Hirschell] always squinted with a vengeful eye upon Mr. Bennett, for not paying obedience to him in his exalted station, for not bowing and kneeling before his throne among all his audiences.”<sup>4</sup>

The feud between him and Solomon Hirschell first broke out in public view some eight years after Bennett’s arrival in London. Sometime before 1807, he became entangled in a business arrangement involving the rabbi that hurt him deeply. Bennett was hired to make an engraving of a portrait of the rabbi painted by Frederick Benjamin Barlin (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2), to be published by I. Josephs and Hyam Barnett in a prayer book for the High Holy Days. The publishers did not get the painter’s permission to copy his work, and fearing a suit they reneged on their agreement to pay Bennett twenty pounds, after he had spent two months working on the engraving. Bennett appealed to the rabbi to resolve the injustice and alleviate the hardship he had experienced. Instead, the rabbi supported the publishers—and after Bennett was sued for one hundred pounds, which he could not pay, he was thrown into debtor’s prison. He was ultimately saved by some of his Christian friends. He concludes:

From that time R. Solomon was invested with the spirit of favouritism and all who cover themselves with his shadow and the shadow of his roof continue to treat me with contempt and shame in the eyes of the multitude of Duke’s Place [the rabbi’s residence]. They have locked and barred doors so that I should not come under the shadow of their roofs, expel me from the borders of Israel, and from being attached to the inheritance of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

When Bennett published his second book, *A Discourse on Sacrifices*, in 1815, Hirschell noticed it and gave a copy to his rabbinic colleague Raphael Meldola, seeking a condemnation of it. Meldola didn’t know English, so he gave the book to a

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3 Solomon Bennett to David Meldola, March 6, 1817, quoted in Richard Barnett, “Haham Meldola and Hazan de Meldola,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 21 (1962–1967): 15–17; quotations, 15–16.

4 Salomon Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke’s Place, Displayed, in a Series of Critical, Theological and Rabbinical Discussions, on a Hebrew Pamphlet, Entitled “Minḥat Kena’ot” (Avenge Offer)* (London: the author, 1818), 8.

5 Bennett, quoted in Barnett, “Haham Meldola and Hazan de Sola,” 16. For their prayer book, the two publishers used an engraving by William Holl of a painting of Hirschell by Joseph Slater Sr.: see frontispiece of David Levi, trans., *The Form of Prayers, for the New Year: According to the Custom of the German and Polish Jews*, rev. Isaac Levi (London: E. Justins, 5567 [1807]), available at <https://jewishmiscellanies.com/2020/03/19/machzor-for-rosh-hashana-the-form-of-prayers-for-the-new-year-according-to-the-custom-of-the-german-and-polish-jews-david-levi-1807/>.



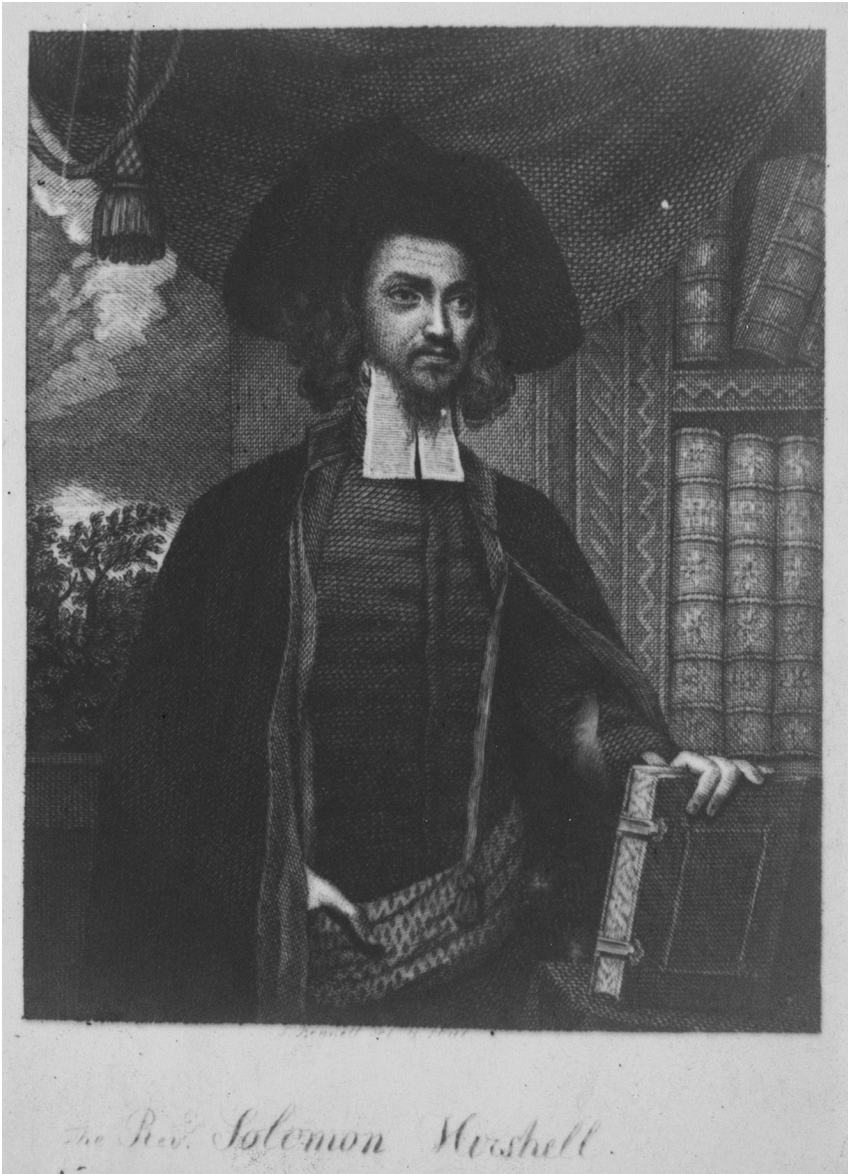
**Figure 3.1:** Rabbi Solomon Hirschell, painting by Frederick Benjamin Barlin.

Mr. Luria of his synagogue: “Mr. Luria returned it to the Rev. Meldola with surprise, asserting that Rabbi Sol. Hirschell must be either ignorant of the merits of this discourse, or that he possessed an inherent hatred and jealousy against Mr. Bennett.”<sup>6</sup> According to Luria, nothing in the book was offensive or inconsistent with Hebrew liturgy.

In the same year, Hirschell commissioned S. I. Cohen, a well-known German rabbi, to prepare a Hebrew catechism called *Shorshei Emunah* for the use of Jewish children in England. It was published in 1815 with the eloquent English translation of Joshua Ben Oven as *The Elements of the Jewish Faith for the Use of Jewish Youth of Both Sexes*. Although Cohen had previously prepared a German edition

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6 Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*, 9.



**Figure 3.2:** Photograph of Bennett's engraving of Barlin's painting.

of this work, the version he offered Hirschell was longer and written with its English audience in mind.<sup>7</sup>

The preface and subsequent dialogue between teacher and student are relatively innocuous and unoriginal. Cohen reflects on the universality of belief in one God known through the awe of his creation. He stresses the moral nature of all religion, singling out the Noahide laws accessible to all humanity. In Cohen's view, these laws reflect three grand principles: the refinement of thought and understanding "whereby we cling to truth and avoid falsehood and deceit, which comprehends the love of intellectual purity, and the negation of the grosser corporeal speculations"; the love of creation; and "a sacred observance of the laws of nature and a repugnance to any act that shall tend to derange them." Although anyone upholding these commandments is considered a religious person, God treated the Jews with special affection by bestowing on them a special law. Nevertheless, they are instructed never to missionize and even to dissuade potential converts. This stands in contrast to the Christian missionaries now active in Great Britain, who pose a threat to the Jewish community: "It is therefore a strange thing in our eyes, that persons should be found who lay in wait for the members of the Jewish faith [ . . . ] to entice them by flattery, lures, and tempting gifts, to abandon the religion wherein they were born and educated, in order to embrace Christianity!"<sup>8</sup>

Cohen's preface ends on a more positive note, however, as it underscores the universalizing tendencies among the religions of his day:

Behold the light of truth is now illuminating all Europe; peace and brotherly love is prevailing among nations of various religious persuasions; the sword of persecution has been returned to its sheath, and those dark ages, when nations strove with nations, and made human blood flow in streams, on account of the different modes of worship, have passed away; all nations now acknowledge one universal Father; and virtues, justice, and righteousness are the only tests whereby men are estimated.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> S. I. Cohen, *Elements of the Jewish Faith* (Richmond, VA: William W. Gray, 5577 [1817]); the text is identical with that of the first edition. I have already summarized the debate over this work in David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 250–256, from which I draw in part. For previous accounts of this debate, see Arthur Barnett, "Solomon Bennett 1761–1838: Artist, Hebraist, and Controversialist," *Jewish Historical Society of England Transactions* 17 (1951–1952): 101–106; David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England, 1484–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 328–329; and Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714–1830* (1979; reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 142–145.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, *Elements of the Jewish Faith*, 5, 7–8.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, *Elements of the Jewish Faith*, 8.

So the author sets the tone for the rest of the catechism: an introduction to the notion of religion in general and the existence of God as creator and sustainer of all the universe. Then Judaism is presented as a particular manifestation of religion based on the thirteen principles of faith articulated by Maimonides and the Decalogue, the civic responsibilities of all Jews to honor the king, and their duty to love humanity.

Apart from its criticism of Christian missionizing, Cohen's booklet seems to be nothing more than an innocent, bland, and highly uncontroversial presentation of the Jewish faith meant for the education of Jewish youth and intended to win the approval of Christians as well. But Solomon Bennett was incensed by its publication and opted to publish a most uncomplimentary account of its author, its translator, and especially its official rabbinic sponsors—primarily Solomon Hirschell and, secondarily, the chief Sephardic rabbi of London, Raphael Meldola. In 1817, Bennett published *Tene Bikkurim* [A basket of criticism], written in Hebrew, obviously directed toward a Continental readership of rabbis and other educated Hebrew readers, and meant to embarrass the English Ashkenazic rabbi before his Continental peers. It immediately incurred the wrath of Rabbi Hirschell, who apparently sanctioned a vicious attack on Bennett's work and character in another Hebrew pamphlet titled *Minḥat Kena'ot* [An offering of jealousy/vengeance], written by a certain Meir Rintel and published in the same year. As if this wasn't sufficient, also in 1817 someone named Meir Hahn published several Hebrew letters against Bennett in a volume appearing in Hamburg called *Shot Lashon* [The whip of the tongue]. In the following year, Bennett responded to his Hebrew critics, but most prominently Rabbi Solomon Hirschell, in an English book published in London: *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*. What had begun as a skirmish confined to readers of the Hebrew language ended as a most unflattering portrait of the London rabbi and his community broadcast to the larger reading community of English Christians and Jews.<sup>10</sup>

There is no doubt, as Arthur Barnett once argued, that the debate between Bennett and Hirschell was based on a clash of strong personalities, of two people who clearly did not like or respect each other. The more Bennett attacked, the more Hirschell counterattacked through his representatives. Bennett was especially critical of Hirschell as a deficient representative of the rabbinate—unenlightened, inarticulate, and incapable of leading his assimilated Jewish community. But Bennett's attack also emerged from his own text-based understanding of

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<sup>10</sup> Solomon Bennett, *Tene Bikkurim* (London: L. Alexander, 1817); Meir Rintel, *Minḥat Kena'ot* (London: Jechiel Hanau, 1816–1817); Meir Hahn, *Shot Lashon* (Hamburg/Altona: Samuel and Judah Bun Segal, 1817); and Bennett, *Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*.

Judaism, and particularly what he believed was required for presenting a catechism of the Jewish faith in the English language to young students.

Bennett's intellectual critique is leveled first in his Hebrew work and repeated in the expanded English text he published a year later (see Figure 3.3). He begins by acknowledging the positive aspect of Cohen's work: "I own conscientiously, that the book, *The Elements of Faith* [ . . . ] contains a good stock of religious and moral principles suitable for the purpose intended; the Hebrew language thereof, is also plain and easy, agreeable to the taste of Jewish youth; God, that they might only practice it." But a difficulty arises, because Cohen failed to base those principles on clear and precise biblical and rabbinic sources:

He did not care whether his lessons were agreeable with the text of the Pentateuch or not; if its precepts were of the nature of a general accord with the Hebrew forms, or that of mere private and individual sentiments, if it be consistent with Scripture, with reason, and matters of fact, or only sentimental, and but matters of opinion; proper reference to some of his lessons to the original text, ought also to have been strictly observed, in a book which is adapted for youth.<sup>11</sup>

The catechism was *nimusiyyut* [general morality] but not *halacha* [Jewish law]. According to Bennett, the author had merely adapted a kind of "gentile morality from the street" and labeled it improperly the foundations of the Jewish faith.<sup>12</sup> Bennett deemed Meldola relatively innocent in this flawed endeavor, but not Cohen and Van Oven and especially not Hirschell.

Bennett then presents nine specific criticisms of Cohen's text, including his imprecise reproduction of the Noahide laws, his omission of the biblical basis for Sabbath observance, his failure to mention the biblical name of the holiday of Shevuot, his extension of the commandment to honor parents to include siblings (a "Talmudic ethic," not a biblical one), and his sloppy derivation of the festivals not from the Pentateuch but from a logical inference regarding Sabbath worship. There is clearly a consistent theme throughout: the foundation of Judaism for Bennett is the Bible. If one is to present an accurate formulation of what Jewish faith is for young people, the principles of Judaism must be directly linked with biblical proof texts. Lacking the latter, those principles represent only the opinion of educators or rabbis.<sup>13</sup>

Rintel's rebuttal focuses more on the character of Bennett, casting aspersions on his orthodoxy. He is accused of having no religion; he had deserted his family and country and he is generally a man of poor character and poor manners. Most

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<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*, 22–47.

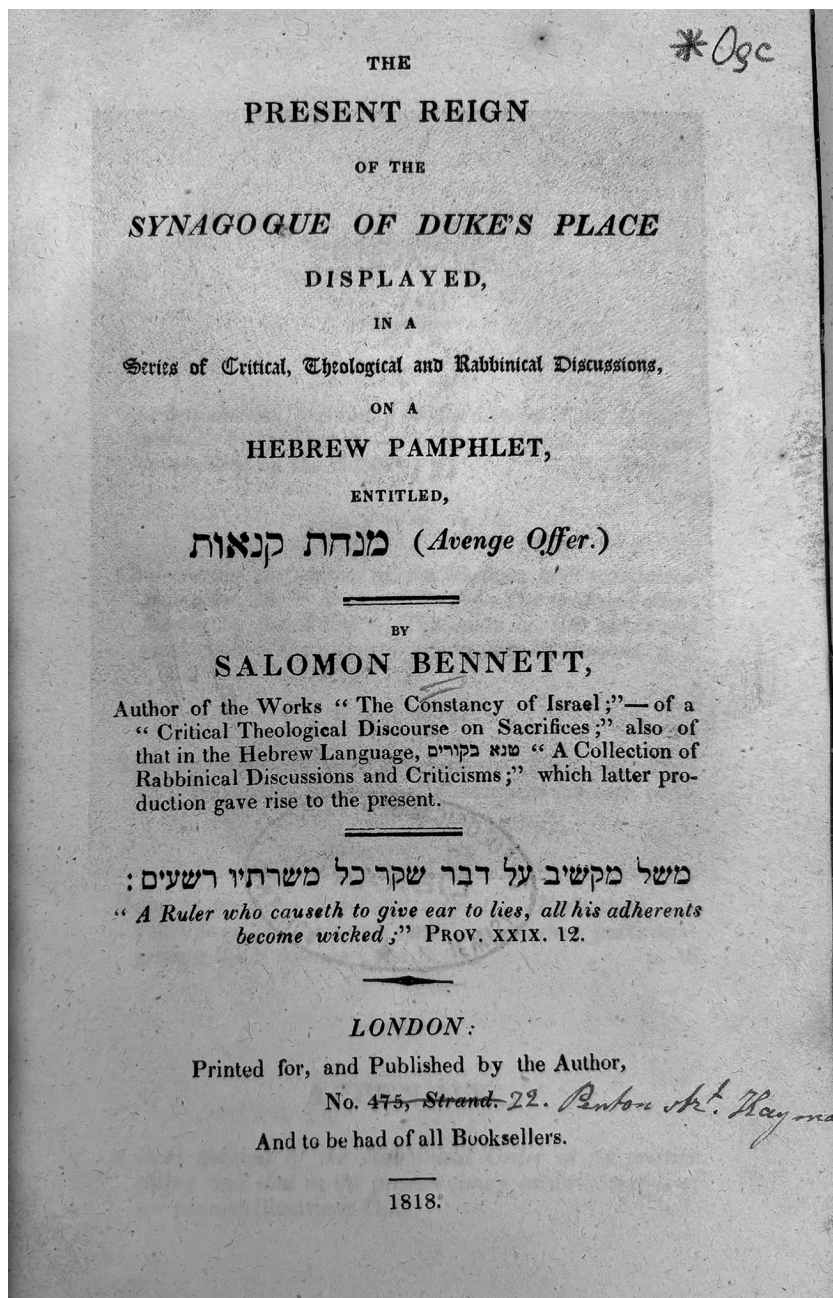


Figure 3.3: Title page of Bennett's *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place* (London, 1818).

prominent is the charge that Bennett had deserted the wife of his youth when he was twenty-five, leaving her an abandoned woman (*agunah*) without material support who in her sorrow had died only two years earlier. Bennett is further portrayed as living among gentiles (*goyim*) who do not observe the ritual commandments of Judaism (*mitsvot*).

He also carefully reviews Bennett's nine points, arguing in each case that Cohen's articulation of Jewish articles of faith is fully in line with tradition. He substantiates this view by regularly citing the Talmud and medieval codes. At one point, Rintel succinctly captures Bennett's position: "You have demonstrated how you prefer the opinion of the Karaites [a medieval Jewish sect] over the *mid-rashim* of the rabbis and also what the Men of the Great Assembly [the precursors of the rabbis] established." He concedes only "that some things in the prefaces to *The Elements of Faith* are of a questionable nature"; but since the prefaces were composed only after Rabbi Hirschell had inspected the text, the rabbi could not be held responsible for an indiscretion.<sup>14</sup> What he may have had in mind was the unrestrained attack on missionaries. But this concession was surely unnecessary, since Bennett never mentioned the prefaces. Elsewhere in his writing, Bennett had similarly voiced his strong opposition to the missionaries.

Hahn's collection of letters opens with a strong endorsement of Cohen and his catechism, singling out especially the remarks on missionaries and the utility of the book for Jews and Christians alike. The rest of the work is hardly of great consequence, except for an interesting short letter written by Cohen himself expressing his sense of shock and disappointment over Bennett's attack. He finds little merit in any of Bennett's specific charges and does not consider them worthy of his response. What is most intriguing is how he generally characterizes his approach in contrast to that of his opponent. For Cohen,

Most of our Torah consists of laws, testimonies, and statutes based on moral authority, especially good for Israel, given from God's love for his people in order that they will be enlightened and prosper in this world and the next. However, according to his [Bennett's] strange opinion, they are only a rod of chastisement to subdue and to sadden the hearts, saying: "Cease your activity from day to day, and if not, I will chastise you ruthlessly. Do this and that and don't ask why! And don't investigate the reason, and if not, I will blot out your memory from humanity for it is sufficient for you that this is a ruling in the *Gemarah* and codes." [ . . . ] He thus was incensed with me for mentioning the reason behind the essential commandments according to reason and morality.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Rintel, *Minhat Kena'ot*, 14, and English preface, ii.

15 Hahn, *Shot Lashon*, 4–5.

Cohen's understanding of Bennett's position is generally consistent with Rintel's and with Bennett's own words. Bennett was a literalist who viewed the catechism as a precise formulation of the Jewish articles of faith. As such, each article required a strong scriptural grounding to be considered true—what Rintel called a “Karaite” position. Cohen's accusation that Bennett demanded blind obedience to the rules of the *Gemarah* and codes appears to contradict this position. But considering the totality of Bennett's writing, it would be more accurate to acknowledge that Bennett prioritized biblical over rabbinic texts. Yet, at the same time, he often consulted and cited the rabbis as well without demanding blind obedience to their rulings. His critique was directed primarily at contemporary ones holding positions of power, such as Hirschell, who lacked competency in the law and any serious exposure to general culture, but not at the classical rabbinic corpus that he studied and respected.

Bennett's criticism of Cohen's work was surely a strategy to attack Solomon Hirschell and the quality of his rabbinic supervision and leadership. But it was more than mere personal antagonism that motivated Bennett to challenge a book approved by the London rabbi. In light of his great scholarly investment in biblical exegesis, grammar, and accurate translation in his other writings, it is obvious that he also cared deeply about what Scripture said and prided himself on his Hebraic erudition to ascertain its correct reading. Being a Jewish intellectual meant defending the integrity of the biblical text and centering the latter as the cornerstone of Jewish faith. At the same time, as his opponents took pleasure in pointing out, Bennett was not an observant “rabbinical” Jew. He once declared that “love, unity, and justice are the chief points of the universe. The rest, I look upon merely as ceremonial affections, which can make no difference with mankind at large and less to a Supreme Power. In this principle I live, and in this principle I will continue.”<sup>16</sup>

Was Rintel's designation of Bennett as a kind of Karaite accurate? In his classic essay on the image of Karaites in eighteenth-century Judaism, Yosef Kaplan points to the pervasive influence of the idealization of the Karaites by the Catholic thinker Richard Simon, especially the correlation he made between Karaites and Protestants on the one hand and Catholics and rabbinic Jews on the other.<sup>17</sup> Per-

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16 Solomon Bennett, *Nezah Yisra'el: The Constancy of Israel: An Unprejudiced Illustration of Some of the Most Important Texts of the Bible: or, A Polemical, Critical, and Theological Reply to a Public Letter, by Lord Crawford, Addressed to the Hebrew Nation* (London: W. H. Wyatt, 1809), viii–ix.

17 See Yosef Kaplan, “‘Karaites’ in Early Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam,” in *Sceptics, Millenarians, and Jews*, ed. David Katz and Jonathan Israel (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 221–229, especially 228–229.

haps Simon's insight fits in casting Bennett largely as a kind of "Protestant" Jew, affirming a universal notion of the deity while upholding a deep-seated biblicism reinforced by his textual studies and the conversations he held with his Christian associates. To him the English catechism for Jews was appropriate if it faithfully reflected positions clearly articulated in Scripture itself. As a digest of mere opinions of later rabbis loosely supported by the biblical text, it could do untold harm to innocent youth who were not proficient enough to consult the text directly. Bennett's stance, accordingly, reflected a position shared by his Protestant contemporaries, but at the same time it was meant to demarcate the Jewish principles of faith, not those of Christianity.

At the end of his *Tene Bikkurim* Bennett also included a collection of letters and notices written about or directed to Rabbi Solomon Hirschell. Two are worthy of mention, and the second is especially interesting as a kind of sequel to the episode involving the portrait of the rabbi. In the first instance, Bennett challenged the authority of several rabbis, including Rabbi Hirschell, because of their excessive leniency in the case of an affluent man from England living with a woman other than his wife. Bennett publishes several Hebrew letters on the case directed to Rabbi Hirschell and to the complaining party, Mannes Polack, in addition to an open letter to the community. Bennett claims that he was accused of mocking the family of Mannes Polack as well as speaking ill of the rabbis Akiva Eiger and Jacob ben Jacob Moses of Lissa regarding their decision to legitimize the wife and the progeny of Polack who were born in impurity. Moreover, Hirschell had also slandered Bennett in challenging the opinions of these eminent rabbis. All these charges were false, and he vigorously offers a defense of himself.

For Bennett, these rabbis were not in England and thus did not understand the matter and the shame of the family of Mannes Polack. Their judgments were based on the limited evidence they were shown and allowed to see. But the spokesman of the treasury, who had been living in Birmingham for fifty years, testified that

the father of impurity Isaac Itsik [the father of Polack's wife], may the name of the evil rot, lived with another woman of a well-known man known in Birmingham and gave birth to unkosher offspring. The unmarried woman continued to live in the house. The *parnasei ha-kehilah* [communal heads] commanded to remove the impure woman (*zonah*) but the husband refused, claiming that King David lived with the wife of Uzziah. Because of this imperfection, the community did not allow him to be one of the leaders of the congregation and to come into the community.

Thus, the conclusion is clear: "This happened here and the rabbis of London who were here never saw anything kosher in this case. And no witness who testifies outside the state [. . .] is reliable in a place where he does not adjudicate." Solo-

mon Hirschell did not agree with the decision of the rabbis to allow the offspring of Itsik to rejoin the congregation, yet he was afraid to challenge their ruling.

Bennett closes the defense of his position as follows:

Here then the house of Israel, my dear ones, and friends of value, is the essence of the matter that went out from my hand. There is no way of purifying the Mannes family. The rabbis of London found no solution and the Mannes family did not grow in Torah and in the mission of Israel but raised Christian children. The rest is known and does not have to be related. The *ḥametz* [the unleavened bread burned before Passover] does not need to be burned because it is already burnt.<sup>18</sup>

Bennett signs his declaration of 28 Sivan 1818 in London with the title “*Raḥim u-mokir rabanna* [One who loves and admires the rabbis, BT *Shabbat* 23], Yom Tov Bennett son of the late Solomon of Poland.” In this remarkable display of a non-rabbi asserting rabbinical authority, challenging the decision even of distinguished rabbinic scholars, there is a certain irony in claiming his affection and admiration for rabbis in general! We shall consider one additional display of Bennett’s challenge to rabbinic authority below.

The second case among the letters published by Bennett again involves the rabbi’s portrait printed in the prayer book, this time in a regular prayer book (*siddur*), which was published by the same men who had harmed Bennett some years earlier:

Sir, having been requested by a friend of mine (an English Gentleman), to provide him with some Hebrew books for his practice in that language, I could not think of any one more proper for that purpose than that of the annual common Hebrew prayer book, in Hebrew and in English, published under your inspection, by Barnett and Joseph (the miserable pabs of your Rabbiship). Having presented the Gentleman with the above-mentioned copy, I was at the first instance not a little embarrassed with the question suggested to me, on seeing your Portrait attached as a Frontispiece to the annual prayer book saying “Pray, Mr. Bennett, is that Rabbi the author of all these various prayers and hymns?” I replied in the absolute negative. The Gentleman pursued his investigation: “Who were then, the authors of them?” I informed him accordingly that they were composed by the men of the great synagogue, during the period of the Second Temple. I specified also to him that they are composed of parts out of the Pentateuch, of the Psalms. [ . . . ] The Gentleman, with an astonishing air, made the following bold observation: “But if this is a volume of prayers of such a high antiquity, and *ex ore prophetarum* (by the mouth of the prophets), what has a portrait of a modern rabbi to do with it? They might as well (and perhaps with more propriety) attach to it the portrait of the king of England, or that of the arch-bishop of Canterbury, as

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<sup>18</sup> The letters appended to *Tene Bikkurim* are also catalogued separately as *Igrot* by the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem under Solomon’s Hebrew name, “Yom Tov Bennett.” They are signed by Bennett and dated 1817–1818. The quotations are all from the final letter, written in 1818.

being the protectors of Judaism, and religion in general.” This last query embarrassed me so far that I could not give him any satisfactory answer without wounding in some part, “Sir (said I), it is impossible for me to apologize for the follies, vanities, ignorance, and interest-  
edness of other people.” Upon which reply, the Gentleman took his Pen-knife and cut the portrait out of the prayer book and putting the same into my hand, said: “Please Mr. B. to return this to its owner.” To accomplish his desire, I take the liberty of addressing you with the sentiments entertained of common sense, with the enclosed valuable portrait of yours. S. Bennett, 475 Strand.<sup>19</sup>

Written in a mocking and ironic style, Bennett presents the rabbi with the ultimate humiliation of incurring the anger of a Christian gentleman offended by the egocentric gesture of the rabbi to “adorn” a prayer book with his own picture. Hirschell’s portrait was offensive not only to Jews but to respectable Christians as well. Indeed, it was necessary, so Bennett ultimately concluded, to publicize the rabbi’s boorishness and insensitivity in a language that enabled Christians too to take notice.

In 1818, Bennett published *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke’s Place* (see Figure 3.3), which, as noted above, transformed what had been an internal dispute among rabbis and educated Hebrew readers primarily on the Continent into a public spectacle meant for the eyes of an English reading public of Jews and Christians alike. Bennett was displaying dirty laundry in public, revealing intimate secrets about himself and his community as a way to defend himself against his adversaries and bolster his own stature among non-Jewish Englishmen. That Bennett expected this book to be read by the most distinguished of his Christian friends is suggested by his handwritten note to Lord Ellenborough (1766–1818), the Lord Chief Justice of England, found in a copy of *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke Place* located in the Cecil Roth collection at Leeds: “To the Rt. Hon. Lord Ellenborough, Presented by the author; requesting the honour of the reading and of taking the contents thereof into consideration.”<sup>20</sup>

Bennett indicates that the book is a defense against the libelous charges made by his detractors, particularly Rabbi Hirschell. But right from the start, Bennett’s bitterness ultimately extends beyond Hirschell and his minions to include Anglo-Jews in general and his snubbing by them as soon as he arrived in London. In a most revealing and intimate passage, he writes:

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<sup>19</sup> This English letter follows the previous one addressed to Rabbi Hirschell. Like the others, it is not paginated. A similar letter was also sent to Mr. Samuel Joseph, parnas of the Duke’s Place Synagogue, requesting that the publishers not be allowed to print the prayer book with the rabbi’s portrait.

<sup>20</sup> On Lord Ellenborough, see Michael Lobban, “Law, Edward, first Baron Ellenborough (1750–1818),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, October 3, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16142>.

I was greatly deceived in my conjectures respecting my own nation; and notwithstanding the great recommendations from my brethren on the continent to those in London, in behalf of my pursuits, yet, in a short period I began to feel their characters, and the coldness towards me. Their doors became barred against me, with the answers, "Master is not at home." "Master cannot speak to you." Adding to which, it is a theme with their religious sentiments, if a Jew be not orthodox in the extreme, they proclaim him an infidel; on the other hand, a man may commit all depredations and immoralities, if he contributed and attended the synagogue, say they, "a good Idee Kiend." As orthodoxy was not a favorite theme with me, particularly as a foreigner and a single man, who cannot abide by all the strictness of ceremonial laws, I was then declared a heretic; (a good pretext indeed to keep me off from their association). [ . . . ] Would I have been qualified to be a good companion to associate in their convivialities, to give an Italian, a French, or German song; would I possess that gallant politeness as to caress their ladies, and domestics, undoubtedly I might obtain their friendship; but alas! I was never educated to such fineries; and the ambition with which I was unfortunately charged in the course of my pursuits, could never allow me such debasements and meanness. An inherent hatred was then entertained against my person, and on which score I never have met with any cordiality from my brethren.<sup>21</sup>

Bennett proceeds to relate how his Christian associates, in contrast, treated him with kindness and respect though he was continually hindered by "that proud pontiff, Sol. Hirschell; prosecutions, and plans were formed by those who cringe under his government, to obstruct all intercourse among my nation, which might contribute to my temporal existence." After Bennett published his *Tene Bikkurim*, "he [Hirschell] became enraged like a tiger," attempting to defame Bennett's character and censor and excommunicate him. Despite Hirschell's continual efforts to harm him, Bennett remains defiant and still claims the right to criticize the rabbi's learning and leadership when doing so is appropriate:

Any individual has the right to inquire into the learning of others, especially the rabbi. I claim the right. [ . . . ] I was brought up and educated among Rabbies, and literary men of my nation (Israel). I was always and am still a *rahim umokir rabanna* [the phrase he had used before,] [ . . . ] honourer of learned men of every description. At the second station of my career, I received also education and emoluments from different Academies and Christian colleges in different nations of Europe. Conscience induces me to own that the literary emoluments which I received in the colleges were in a great measure an enhancement to my Hebrew, and literary knowledge. (O! would to God, that our modern Rabbies were better acquainted with languages, the diversity of sciences, and literary forms, and no doubt that they might be of more advantage and add more honour to the house of Israel than in their present state.) I have now been a resident in this metropolis above seventeen years; the name of my nation was always an honour to me; our Hebrew liturgy was always my delight, the amusements of my vacant times, my comforts in times of adversity; all which, is far more open to the knowledge of my Christian gentlemen friends in this metropolis, than to

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21 Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*, 4–5.

my own brethren; it is to them, [Christians] being of more candour, and impartiality in my case, that I shall call for testimony in behalf of my character.<sup>22</sup>

Here then is a confident Jewish intellectual, claiming his accreditation as a scholar from the Christian world of learning and not from the *yeshivah*, and pitting his authority against that of the London rabbi and of other rabbis who are as ill-equipped for leadership of the Jewish congregations they serve.

Bennett then rehearses many of the same arguments he had voiced in his Hebrew tome against Solomon Cohen's catechism. He also defends himself against accusations related to his two English publications. He is especially sensitive to the personal slander voiced against him regarding the level of his religious observance and boldly offers a scathing response to his adversaries:

It is not worth my while to apologize for the mentioned accusations, vomited by that malevolent scribbler against me; my thoughts are open before the Omniscient, and my actions before a respectable public who are better acquainted with my conduct, than those miserable spungers, the Rabbies of Duke's place, who scarcely know me in person; all that they say about me, is but by hearsay, and fictitious. But I shall not scruple to retort the mentioned accusations to the bulk of the Rabbi's adherents, the followers of his standard. And, as it is neither a mystery, nor an individual concomitance, so I hope that my brethren will not find themselves offended with my observation.<sup>23</sup>

Bennett had earlier castigated his Jewish co-religionists for their lack of hospitality and kindness to him. But it is their basic lack of commitment to Jewish practice that galls him and that the rabbi completely ignores and tolerates:

Why is he so scrutinous of the supposed conduct of one individual, and yet to be so indifferent to the bulk of his Synagogue the followers of his standard? Seeing that the Royal Exchange, the Stock Exchange, and the Coffee-houses adjoining are all filled with Jew merchants, transacting business on the Sabbaths and the holy day quite public, without being confused before the Christian world, the adversaries to Judaism. [. . .] I have often seen myself, Jewish Picture dealers of pretended piety, furniture and cloth-sellers, attend public sales on the Sabbath day, all without blushing before the Christian community.<sup>24</sup>

Their religion, their literature, and "everything essential to the house of Israel" are all in a state of degeneracy, degrading the name of God publicly. And throughout, the rabbi never rebukes but shuts his eyes to the sins of his congregation. Bennett, of course, acknowledges the challenges of earning a living and "find[s] myself under that predicament, like the most part of my brethren," so he cannot

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<sup>22</sup> Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke Place*, 6, 16–17.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke Place*, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke Place*, 55–56.

fault the laypersons for their economic challenges and limitations. Yet he cannot excuse “most of the rabbis [who] live on lucrative income without labor; they cringe before the rich, while tyrannizing over the lesser class of their numerous adherents.”<sup>25</sup>

Before closing his sensational portrait of Anglo-Jewry and its corrupt rabbinic leadership, Bennett discloses the salient facts about how Hirschell obtained his rabbinical post through the urging of his father and through the agency of the most affluent lay leadership. In this extraordinary critique of his rabbinic detractors and the chief “Jewish pontiff” Hirschell, Bennett offered the Christian world a bold defense of his fragile position within his newly adopted community as well as a withering attack on the superficiality and depravity of rabbinic and lay leadership alike. No doubt, in his emotional public outburst to defend his good name among English Christians, he had soiled the image of his Jewish community and reinforced for many the existing stereotype of the latter.<sup>26</sup>

In the years following the publication of his exposé on Hirschell and London Jewry, the tension between Bennett and the rabbi seems to have abated. In 1824, when Bennett published his commentary on the Temple of Ezekiel, Rabbis Hirschell and Meldola were both listed as subscribers, clearly indicating their endorsement of Bennett’s work. Bennett explicitly mentions his reconciliation with his archenemy in a pamphlet that he published in 1825 and that was only recently discovered:

Eight years ago, I entertained the literary public with two Pamphlets, the one entitled *Tene Bikkurim* i.e. A Collection of Theological and Rabbinic Literary Enquiries; and the other, *The Present Reign of Duke’s Place Synagogue*, comprising the same enquiries, in addition of other political and moral enquiries of our present much learned Reverend Dr. Solomon Hirschel, Grand Rabbi of Duke’s Place Synagogue; the first was published in the Rabbinical style of the Hebrew language, for the inspection of the Continental Rabbies, but the second was published in the English language, calculated merely for the English reader.

The animosity of our venerable Rabbi against my person, was carried on for many years; however, time brought about that by the mediation of some friends, a reconciliation between me and the Rabbi took place; I used to visit him, and always did pay him his due respect; he in return did treat me friendly. I have often received from him very polite Hebrew letters; in short when I flattered myself with the idea of having him for the head, I found that I have him not so much as for the tail; the ambition, and the hatred with which he was charged against me, evidently was ingrafted in his heart, and was lurking only for a

<sup>25</sup> Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke Place*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett’s biting criticism of the London rabbinate and the Anglo-Jewish upper and middle classes surely reflects his own personal experience. Nevertheless, it is also substantiated by other sources that testify to the London community’s superficiality, materiality, and cultural assimilation. See especially Endelman’s comprehensive account in *The Jews of Georgian England*, chap. 4.

vent to break out; and like the vomiting of the Etna, for an innocent action of mine, but not agreeable with his sovereign authority and pride, our virtuous Rabbi broke out his fury, and did send his sovereign *Mandate*, to call my name out publicly in the Synagogues, *and to excommunicate four families* from all the rights of the Synagogue. As very few are acquainted with the particulars of the *heinous transgression* I have committed, I therefore thought proper to present to the public the particulars thereof, that the judicious reader may judge for himself of the virtues of our *High Priest* (as called vulgarly).<sup>27</sup>

The incident that unleashed the old animosity between Hirschell and Bennett after a hiatus and seeming reconciliation of eight years was an irregular marriage ceremony conducted by Bennett and a colleague after the union of the couple had been deemed illegal by both chief rabbis of London, Hirschell and Meldola. Aaron, the son of Barukh and a Cohen, had turned to Hirschell to marry Rachel, the daughter of “Abraham our father,” whose father was Jacob Harris and whose mother was a non-Jewish woman. Although the prospective bride had converted, the bridegroom was of priestly descent, and therefore Rabbi Hirschell refused to sanction the marriage. Hirschell soon discovered that Bennett had performed the ceremony “not solemnized in accordance with the Law of Moses and of Israel.” In the Minute Book of the Great Synagogue is the following entry for August 3, 1825:

“27th July, 1825. To the worthy Pious and Respectable, the Elders, and other members of the Great Synagogue. [ . . . ] Whereas it cannot but be known unto that a certain person designated by the name of Solomon Bennet, an Engraver, together with a coadjutor called Rabb. Jacob Michalki [ . . . ] have joined themselves in an unlawful act, wherein the said S. Bennet has presumed to take upon himself the authority of officiating as Priest at a ceremony of marriage, of which he determined the ordinance, and signed as witness in conjunction with the said Rabbi Jacob, as appears from their joint signatures on the contract; and whereas the same S. Bennet, did after certain inquiries being made respecting such a proceeding cause to be presented before me a Document defending that measure upon reasons which he has fancied correct and legal, and to which he has affixed his signature. Now be it known unto you that both the learned and Reverend Meldola, Chief Rabbi of the Portuguese Congregation, and the *Beit Din* as well as myself have duly examined, and find that the same is founded on a miscomprehended or perverted explanation of the law as laid down by the Rambam, the words of which are decidedly contrary to the sense upon which the said marriage was allowed and celebrated, and that such proceedings had the appearance of an intention to gloss over the law by misrepresentation of its meaning, we have therefore thought it necessary to send herewith a copy of the said Document [ . . . ] in order to prevent

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27 Solomon Bennett, *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation* (1816), a four-page pamphlet signed by him and three others justifying his officiating at a wedding between a Kohen (a person born into a priestly family) and a convert's daughter, generally forbidden by Jewish law. A copy of this rare document can be found in the vast papers of the Baroness Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee (with her annotations) in the National Archives, Richmond, United Kingdom, TS 11/276/999/4. The quotation is from the first page.

the propagation of the sin contracted by a Kohen wedding with a female contrary to the regulations of purity made and provided for such cases by our venerable Rabbies as founded on the sacred law.

We therefore think it highly requisite that a publication should be made in every Synagogue respecting this circumstance, [. . .] and we do not question but that the religious feeling and good sense that prevails among the leaders of Israel will accord with this measure, and thereby present in future any illegal and unauthorized procedure of this kind and put a stop to the presumption of unlettered and unordained persons ever attempting to act in so sacred a matter as this[.]<sup>28</sup>

A similar proclamation, which need not be reproduced here, can be found in the minutes of the *Mahamad* of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. What is entirely novel is Bennett's response and justification of his act in his pamphlet *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation* (1816)—evidently a different document than the one mentioned in the minutes above that contained a defense based allegedly on the arguments of Maimonides. To the best of my knowledge, only one copy of the pamphlet, which apparently circulated among the members of the Ashkenazic synagogue, is extant. I discovered the printed text in the personal archive of Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee, one of Bennett's employers and Christian associates, with a few of her own annotations. Bennett had obviously given her a personal copy, which she preserved.<sup>29</sup>

Bennett opens this work with the background of his relationship with Rabbi Hirschell, quoted above. Then he turns to the case at hand with some relevant information that the minutes of the two synagogues omitted:

A gentleman, by the name of Mr. Harris, of our Israelitish community, a man who bears a good character, having, in his primitive state of life, married a young woman who had become a proselyte to Judaism, (agreeable to our ritual laws, which has been performed, as testified from abroad) with whom he had a daughter previous to his marriage, but who became a proselyte with her mother, in her infant state, between two and three years old, and since her nativity, she has been under the care of her parents. I have also to notice, that Mr. Harris did marry his proselytish lady in the Synagogue of Duke's Place, with the then sanction of our present Rabbi, Solomon Hirschel.<sup>30</sup>

The daughter grew up and fell in love with a man named Aaron Cohen. The father Harris turned to Rabbi Hirschell to approve their union but he refused, arguing (on the basis of Numbers 31:18) that Jewish law prohibits the marriage of a Jew of priestly heritage and a proselyte. Bennett immediately challenged this rul-

<sup>28</sup> The text is quoted in Barnett, "Solomon Bennett," 107; see also Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England*, 144–145.

<sup>29</sup> Lee and her relationship with Bennett are discussed at length in chapter 5, below.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation*, 1.

ing, citing the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Yevamot*, where the rabbis infer that a child under the age of three is permitted to marry a priest.<sup>31</sup> Despite repeated approaches to the rabbi, Hirschell denied the parent his request. The courtship was unbreakable, Bennett adds, and the relationship continued for two years longer.

Bennett observed that separating the loving couple was impossible and the law, in his estimation, could have been bent. The rabbis could always find a means to allow the marriage, if there had been an adequate “stimulus”—that is, a bribe. Harris turned to Bennett for his opinion on the law, which Bennett believed was flexible enough to allow marriage. At the same time, Harris did not think a grant to the rabbi (“which opens the eyes of many learned men”) was appropriate. Bennett thought himself eminently qualified to present all the rabbinic texts in favor of the union but felt that doing so would not change the minds of the rabbi and his admirers. But two essential points are worthy of mention: the young woman was under the age of three when she became a proselyte, and she was raised all her life as a *bat Yisrael* [a daughter of Israel] by her Jewish father. Mr. Harris then asked Bennett to officiate at the wedding. Believing that the couple would continue to live together and their offspring would be considered illegitimate, Bennett agreed to perform the wedding according to the law of Israel. Hirschell was incensed, especially when he saw that Bennett was involved, and “without any enquiry after the parties concerned in it,” he drew up his *Mandate* to be issued in the Synagogues of London on different Sabbath days, excommunicating Aaron Cohen and his offspring, as well as Bennett and his co-officiant Jacob until they confessed to their offense against rabbinical authority.<sup>32</sup>

Bennett excoriated the rabbi for the severity of his judgment against Aaron Cohen and his family but took especial umbrage at Hirschell’s action against him. He declares his innocence

particularly, as my name and character (thanks to heaven) stands good, and if not among my Jewish brethren, yet it stands good with many literary gentlemen of the Christian community, from whose candour and bounty alone depends on the temporal existence of me and my family. Have I not a right to exclaim that such a *kruz/Mandate*, was calculated by our virtuous Rabbi, merely to defame my name among my nation, as not to receive any emolument from my brethren?

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<sup>31</sup> I am not sure which text in *Yevamot* Bennett is citing; but compare BT *Kiddushin* 78a, the view of Shimon Bar Yochai: “It was taught, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, ‘A woman who converted aged less than three years and a day is eligible to marry a *kohen*, as it is said [in the context of a battle against the Midianites], “kill every boy and every woman that has known man by lying with him,] but all the young women, who have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves” (Num. 31:17–18). And wasn’t Pinḥas [a *kohen*] among them?”

<sup>32</sup> Bennett, *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation*, 1–2.

He offers further examples of how others before him—such as Rev. Mr. Lyon of Cambridge and one Rabbi Nissan—performed “illegal” marriages but were never threatened with excommunication. Nor has the rabbi excommunicated his congregants married to non-Jews, or those who prefer “Westphalian ham to the beef of England,” or those who profane the Sabbath and festivals or who break the Ten Commandments. Instead, “they are indulged by our rabbi to keep offices and sacred functions in the Synagogues. [. . .] In short, our virtuous rabbi keeps a strict watch over the poor class of his adherents, but entirely shuts his eyes from the rich class of the Jews, who are the essence of his wealth, and the support of his vain dignity.” The rabbi threatens to leave his post over the impiety of his congregants, Bennett adds, but never will leave, since “he knows the value of the golden idols more than those of respectable and literary men[.]”<sup>33</sup>

Bennett also points out the wealth accumulated by the rabbi from his supporters,

which he possesses in the Bank of England, in the stocks, and in annuities—the splendid set of silver plate, and other effects, of the value of above three thousand pounds sterling! [. . .] What good, what improvements did our Rabbi introduce among his congregation. [. . .] What are his literary productions which he published, the religious disputes, and Rabbinical works, as to give lessons for the improvement of mankind, as to make him so rich and so populous?

He is rewarded for his silence and for ignoring the rich people who commit transgressions while punishing Bennett for an inoffensive act that touched his rabbinical pride and dignity. And with further sarcasm Bennett adds: “Oh what a sound it gave among my Jewish brethren—‘The rappi tit seclude Mr. Bennett from the Synacocks!!!,’” mocking the accented English of his fellow Jews.<sup>34</sup>

Bennett closes his aggressive assault on Rabbi Hirschell with gibes at his unsuccessful attempts to excommunicate him for his Hebrew book against the rabbi, as both Rabbi Meldola and the rabbis of Paris strongly denied Hirschell’s request to do so when approached. But despite his previous friendship with Meldola, Bennett is hurt by the latter’s participation in this present affair to punish him. He explains that this was probably the result of the recent tension between the two arising from the rabbi’s failure to pay Bennett for translating and editing his work, *The Thirteen Creeds*. Bennett finally assures Rabbi Hirschell that he will never make any confession of guilt; his livelihood is intact because he does not rely on other Jews to support him. He hopes that the matter will finally

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<sup>33</sup> Bennett, *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett, *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation*, 3–4.

be decided in a public court of justice—and as his annual grand sermon in the synagogue is soon approaching, the rabbi will have ample material upon which to preach on this matter “to give a good entertainment for his audience at large.” The document is signed by Solomon Bennett, Jacob Harris, Aaron Cohen, and Mr. Jacobs.<sup>35</sup>

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35 Bennett, *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation*, 4.