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CER and RCE: what do they stand for?

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The Conference of European Rabbis was founded in 1956 by the late Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie ztl as a networking body in which isolated rabbonim could experience chizuk as well as being part of a forum where they could get practical advice on halachic matters. For a number of years it remained largely a moribund body, trying hard to punch above its weight with modest achievements to show for its efforts. In the last thirty years, first under the presidency of Lord Rav Jakobovits ztl and later under the Chief Rabbi of France, Rav Sitruk ztl, it has made significant strides in a number of fields especially during, and since, the period under the directorship of our unforgettable Aba Dunner zl.

Some have argued that the CER is no more than a talking shop as implied in part of its name: Conference. Even if that were the case, there is much to be said for a forum where many rabbonim are given the opportunity to meet their counterparts and discuss matters pertinent to their role. After all, the rabbonim who are mostly Chareidi, serve principally in mainstream kehillos. As such, they often find themselves

alone and somewhat isolated. CER provides them with the opportunity to meet other rabbonim who may face similar challenges and where they can exchange ideas and experiences. If the CER provides that facility for them, then it cannot be a bad thing. So what does the CER really do for Jewry?

Responding to an urgent need, the CER established a European Beis Din under its own Rosh Beis Din, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu, who besides being a talmid chochom of widespread repute brings with him some 40 years of practical experience from having occupied the same position in Manchester and later in London where in both cities he raised standards. Besides the usual role of dealing with difficult Dinei Torah it does valuable work in the fields of regularising gittin and geirus. It also calls upon the services of the LBD's kashrus division for the certification of kosher products. The Beis Din has also achieved notable results in the kashrus reliability of European mikyaos, many of which date back to well before the Second World War and therefore require inspection, repair and refurbishing.

As with most Jewish organisations, a rival group called the Rabbinical Centre for



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Europe also emerged. The RCE was founded in 2000 by young Chabad rabbonim following the direction of senior rabbonim. As a purely personal observation I consider it indeed unfortunate that Lubavitch frequently finds it difficult to be part of what exists already and therefore 'goes it alone'. It is also less than clear what the RCE has achieved in

Western Europe, but no doubt in due course someone will put me right. The RCE has been also active in youth work and sponsors bar mitzvahs for immigrant boys in Israel. Their website reports that their European Kosher division has been instrumental in raising European standards of kashrus. It also states that the RCE has constructed or refurbished some 60 mikvaos in Europe and the FSU. Having worked for near on 30 years in the revival of Yiddishkeit in the FSU I can verify that without the dozens of Chabad shiluchim spread across numerous kehillos, the picture would be even worse that unfortunately it is. Their mesirus nefesh has also resulted in addition to the building of new mikvaos, new Jewish schools as well as introducing services to revive Yiddishkeit.

Another area in which the CER is active is in the preservation of Jewish cemeteries through its Lo Sishkach (לא תשכח) wing. In this work it has mainly been as campaigners rather than field workers. The London-based organisation under the stewardship of the Z'kan Rosh Hayeshivos, Rav Elyokim Schlesinger has probably chalked up even greater success in this area of Avodas Hakodesh.

Rabbi Pinchos Goldschmidt, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, and current president of the CER, announced, as reported in the Jewish press, a decision to appoint an ambassador to tackle the rise of the anti-Semitic far right in Europe. Whilst this is a well worth initiative, the appointee, if he is to succeed, will have to be a person who has some European clout in order to make an impression and be listened to by those who wield power in the political arena. The six figure salary that a person with these credentials could command, as well as the cost of running the office, could, however, prove something of a sticking point. If this post, however, succeeds then it could be a reasonable investment.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that both the CER and the RCE are valuable organisations that can point to some outstanding successes, notably in improving shemiras hamitzvos, but as my old school reports show- and this may apply to the CER and RCE in some measure- to quote from the oft-repeated comments from a range of frustrated teachers:

"When he makes the effort, Alex is capable of producing some good work, but he needs to try harder more often."

