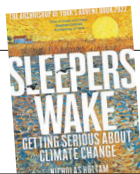


BOOKS



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Plenty to mull over

JENNIFER LIPMAN

**Britain's Jews:
Confidence, Maturity, Anxiety**
HARRY FREEDMAN

(BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM, 368 PP, £20)

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AN ALIEN with no prior knowledge would come away from Harry Freedman's (pictured) new book with an unparalleled knowledge of the highs and lows of the British Jewish community over the last century: certainly a greater familiarity than most Britons, and likely better than most British Jews. This is due to the level of detail in the book, which delves into everything about Europe's "only Jewish community to have survived [the Holocaust] completely intact", from the expansion of faith schools to the fortunes of congregations outside London, along with the internecine squabbling that characterises most organised religions.

If you are curious about, say, the origins of there being a UK Chief Rabbi, or the philosophies of the different denominations and how they have developed in the UK, this book is your guide. Freedman, a prolific author of books on Jewish subjects, has produced something that could fairly lay claim to becoming the definitive guide to British Jewry, drawing on interviews with a who's who of luminaries including the head of the Board of Deputies, charity leaders and the odd peer.

But *Britain's Jews* is more than a primer.

Freedman is specifically concerned with telling the story of British Jews in the lead up to, and wake of, the Corbyn era. Given that an hour can be a long time in politics, especially nowadays, readers might recall only faintly the level of trepidation felt by many – if not all – British Jews regarding the prospect of a Labour victory in 2019.

As Freedman sets out, this was not because of a rightward shift per se, but due to the stench of antisemitism felt to hang over the party. Fear was visceral; Jewish commentators drew comparisons with the 1930s and families discussed at dinner tables whether they would be welcome in the country if Jeremy Corbyn became prime minister.

The author does not interrogate at length whether this anxiety was warranted. Rather he is interested in how the community responded – by raising its voice in an unprecedented way. Until recently, he suggests, most wanted to blend in (other than Haredi Jews, for whom distinctiveness is an essential characteristic). Now, young Jews think nothing of talking about their faith, with a confidence that belies their history.

British Jews today are "far more prepared to stand up for themselves, to celebrate their Jewishness, than previous generations," he writes. Certainly, I have no problem speaking publicly about my identity in a way I expect my grandparents would never have done. Yet I wonder if Freedman places too much emphasis on this as a singularly Jewish phenomenon, as opposed to one seen across the

board among digital natives used to turning every experience into social media fodder.

Perhaps more interesting than the well trodden story of Corbyn and the Jews – a subject already covered, of course, by David Baddiel in his best-selling *Jews Don't Count*

– is Freedman's examination of what the future might bring if secularism and ultra-religiosity squeeze out the mainstream. He contends that the bigger threat than antisemitism is assimilation, "of British Jewry gradually dissipating and disappearing as it becomes absorbed into the mainstream". Equally, there are illuminating nuggets, for example on the relationship between British Jews and Israeli

and French expats, or how intra-communal relations were strengthened during the pandemic.

There are omissions, not least the history of the myriad Jewish youth movements, which have surely been instrumental in inducing the new confidence he examines. But these are few. More, my question is whom the book is for. It's perhaps too focused on the minutiae of Jewish life for readers outside the faith, yet would those who already live and breathe communal life really feel the need to read this?

That said, as someone steeped in Jewish faith, practice, culture and communal life, who has written for *The Jewish Chronicle* for more than a decade, it gave me plenty to mull over. And as a portrait of a community at a particular moment, it is an exhaustive, impressive achievement.

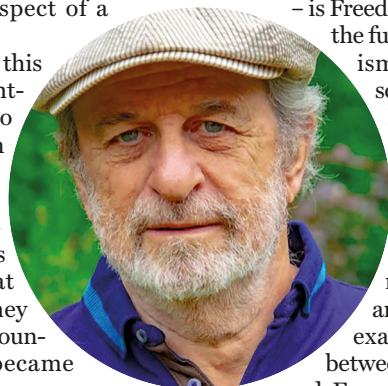


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