Religious culture | *Book Review*

No longer silent

What makes British and American Jewish communities tick?

By Matthew Reisz

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A Jewish pro-Palestine demonstrator, New York, 2021 | © ED JONES/AFP via Getty Images

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BRITAIN'S JEWS
Confidence, maturity, anxiety
368pp. Bloomsbury. £20 (US $35).
Harry Freedman

BAD JEWS
A history of American Jewish politics and identities
320pp. Hurst. £20 (US: Harper. $28.99).
Emily Tamkin

There is a common view of Britain's Jews encapsulated in a story Harry Freedman reports about the late broadcaster Michael Freedland. For many years in the 1970s and 1980s he hosted a programme on BBC Radio London called *You Don't Have to Be Jewish*. Though there were several other Jews working for the station at the time, Freedland was the only one to be "out" as Jewish. His son Jonathan, the distinguished *Guardian* journalist and novelist, told Freedman: "I remember [my father] saying that the other Jews on the radio station were really uncomfortable with his programme, and worried it would sort of rub off on them, that it would somehow make people think 'Oh, shouldn't you be working on the Jewish programme?' They didn't like it"'.

According to Naomi Alderman, writing in her debut novel, *Disobedience* (2006), British Jews "value *absolute invisibility* above all other virtues". Those who lament such an attitude often contrast it with the apparent confidence of Jewish life in the United States, where "the great American novel", at least in its postwar guise, is steeped in Jewishness, and where Jewish themes are far more prominent in popular culture and, indeed, the national conversation. It is somewhat paradoxical, therefore, to read these two new books side by side. Freedman's insider account of Britain Jewry, based on about 100 interviews, tells a story of "confidence", "maturity", even relative cohesion (as well as residual "anxiety" about antisemitism), in a country where Alderman's Jews "are no longer silent. Or at least, they are a lot less silent than they used to be". Emily Tamkin's much more personal and anguished book, *Bad Jews*, which draws on about 150 interviews, surveys a century or so of American Jewish history and sees today's US community (or communities) as riven by divisions and name-calling.

In *Britain's Jews* Freedman seems notably at ease with himself, and merely amused by the kind of contrariness and kvetching that means those working in Jewish communal organizations find "everybody else knows how to do their job better than they do, and nobody is afraid to tell them so". The author explores everything from the plight of the "chained wives" unable to obtain a religious divorce to "the Jewish psychedelic movement" (which believes that "chemically assisted mystical encounters are a normative part of Jewish spirituality"), from the EcoSynagogue project promoting carbon neutrality to the Jewish schools in which the majority of pupils are Muslims. He cites the success of Jewish Book Week, the annual Limmud educational festival and the JW3 cultural centre on London's Finchley Road. The last of these is modelled on the Jewish community centres that are a notable feature of American life. While British Jewish buildings "tend to be discreet, barely visible, blending in with the environment", Freedman says, JW3 has "a large, unmissable, gaudy sign on its façade ... It deliberately shouts, 'Look at us!' JW3's brash building is an essential part of its brand. It wants to be noticed".

Another theme is the way Jewish institutions now reach out well beyond their core constituency to apply "Jewish values" to broader concerns. Successive chief rabbis Immanuel Jakobovits and Jonathan Sacks were both prominent figures in wider ethical debates in the UK; although Freedman doesn't specifically mention him in this context, the incumbent, Ephraim Mirvis, is too. The main Jewish charities no longer focus solely on relieving Jewish suffering. World Jewish Relief, for example, works in Rwanda, and its president argues that "We helped refugees in the 1930s because *they* were Jewish, and we help refugees today because *we* are Jewish". According to Trevor Pears of the Pears Foundation, a philanthropic fund "rooted in Jewish values", volunteers may still enjoy "gap year programmes in Israel", but it is "just as empowering Jewishly" to "go on a fact-finding mission ... to Ghana". XR Jews, a group within Extinction Rebellion, "consider non-violent civil disobedience to be a religious duty", Freedman reports, since "their actions in defence of the environment

are rooted in the Jewish value that prioritizes the saving of life over everything else". And the very existence of a lobbying charity called Nahamu, specifically designed to "speak out against harms systematically arising in the *haredi* community", points to a "new, more open, even self-critical, attitude" among British Jews.

Even when it comes to antisemitism, Freedman suggests that "the situation is not as grim as it is sometimes portrayed". He cites a range of views about the former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, from a woman who, despite having what she describes as a "ridiculous English schoolgirl accent", "began to feel like an alien in my own country, like the mask has been ripped away" during the recent period of Labour's antisemitism crisis to those who believe that Corbyn was unfairly targeted by the right-wing press. Freedman clearly believes there was room for serious concern during the Corbyn years, yet he also puts a positive spin on the way Jews responded so forcefully to the perceived danger. While there has long been talk of a "Jewish vote" in the US, it was hostility to Corbyn, Freedman argues, that meant that, during the 2019 general election, "there was clear evidence of a Jewish vote" "for the first time in British history".

Furthermore, joint government briefings and the need to co-ordinate responses to the Covid pandemic brought the often hostile orthodox, progressive and Haredi strands of the Jewish community into dialogue. This has arguably led to a longer-term increase in "cross-communal goodwill": "leaders from across the religious spectrum ... now acknowledge that their common interests outweigh their religious differences".

In his conclusion Freedman argues that "Britain's tangle of Jewish communities have squared the circle of being fully integrated into national life while retaining their own identity. They are mature, confident and settled, and have a much better idea of how to see off their enemies". There is indeed much to celebrate, and this line seems broadly convincing, if a little rose-tinted. It is a pity, however, that the book doesn't explore Jewish feelings about the only realistic alternative to Corbyn in 2019, namely Boris Johnson, campaigning on a platform to get (a particular kind of) Brexit "done". Only 31 per cent of British Jews, after all, voted Leave in the 2016 referendum. Reports indicate that Jews make up the majority of those who have since tried to obtain joint citizenship in other European countries. And some have claimed to spot antisemitic stereotypes in Johnson's appalling novels.

Tamkin is certainly exercised about her own country's recent populist leader, Donald Trump, who proved just as divisive among Jews (who tend to vote Democrat) as among other Americans. (The Democrat-Republican split in the Jewish vote in the 2020 election was 68 per cent to 30 per cent: broadly in line with recent trends and, as it happens, almost identical to the Jewish Remain-Leave split in the UK.) As Tamkin's sweeping survey reminds us, Jews in the US have been bankers and union organizers; refugees and Zionists; unthinking beneficiaries of their status as "white"; communists, civil rights activists and neoconservatives. It has not been unusual for particular groups to dismiss their opponents as "bad Jews", "self-hating Jews" or even worse. But Trump's Jewish supporters, who believe he is a great friend of Israel, have arguably taken this to a new level. A particularly shocking example is the attack that David Friedman, later Trump's ambassador to Israel, launched on J Street – a "pro-peace" but also "pro-Israel" organization set up as an alternative to more hardline lobbying groups – in 2016. "They are far worse than kapos – Jews who turned in their fellow Jews in the Nazi death camps", Friedman wrote. "The kapos faced extraordinary cruelty and who knows what any of us would have done in those circumstances to save a loved one? But J Street? They are just smug advocates of Israel's destruction delivered from the comfort of their secure American sofas."

Such vicious Jew-on-Jew infighting has a more personal dimension for Tamkin. In 2021 Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, described intermarriage as "a plague and a second Holocaust". In the same year a leading Jewish philanthropist called Matthew Bronfman, when asked what keeps him awake at night, replied: "Intermarriage". When Tamkin read the interview with Bronfman, she reports, it made her reflect on her identity as "a Jewish woman who had married a non-Jewish man a few months prior. I read this and thought of my husband, who joined a synagogue with me; lights Shabbat candles every week with me; hosts Passover seders with me; buys apples and honey for Rosh Hashanah; has his own menorah; watches movies about Jewish history and culture with me; goes to Jewish museums and memorials around the world with me; and agreed while we were still dating to raise our children Jewish". Tamkin also had the inspiring example of her mother, a Catholic convert to Judaism who brought up her three children as Jews and still "takes the morality of Judaism really seriously", though she was "often not treated warmly by members of the Jewish community". All this led the author to wonder whether Bronfman "understood what it felt like to hear from people who are held up as Jewish leaders that the big threat to Jewishness is you, a person who is so proud to be Jewish and who happens to love someone who is not". In a kind of riposte she has structured her historical account around the idea of the "Bad Jew" – a theme she sets up to undermine.

To take one example, Tamkin cites the case of a scholar called Mordecai Kaplan, who in 1942 published *The New Haggadah*, an updated version of the text used for Passover meals. Kaplan's book removed all references to Jews as the "chosen people" and included an African American spiritual. A group of rabbis not only objected to *The New Haggadah*, but burnt copies of it. The incident, Tamkin observes, is "an almost perfect illustration of the meaninglessness of the term 'Bad Jew,' or rather of how its meaning is determined by whoever happens to throw out the term. Who, in this story, is the better Jew: the one who rewrote the Haggadah or the one who set it on fire?"

This is surely right. In 2020, as Tamkin reminds us, "two Jewish men – Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire ex-mayor of New York, and Bernie Sanders, the Brooklyn-born socialist – ran for president". Both, no doubt sincerely, talked about their pride in being Jewish, but they had very different conceptions of what this required of them. Bloomberg, for example, described some of Sanders's comments as "offensive, divisive, and dangerous to Israel … and to Jews". Most people will have views about who is more admirable and who would have made the better president. But it was the presidency that they were running for, not what Tamkin mockingly calls "the office of America's Best and Most Correct Jew".

I can see why the accusation of her being a "Bad Jew" feels so painful to Tamkin, never mind that of her contributing to a "second Holocaust". And I am glad she has found a synagogue that has given her "what I wanted from Jewishness: a sense of connectedness and tradition and meaning, and also a sense of discomfort and challenge". Her historical analysis is illuminating and her lightly sketched-in personal story moving. But where Freedman is celebratory in a way that can feel a bit bland, Tamkin can seem overzealous in picking apart some of the comforting myths American Jews repeat about themselves.

"One of the most enduring stories", she notes, is about how "American Jews understood the importance of civil rights and staunchly supported the movement in the 1950s and '60s". She cites some powerful statistics to justify this claim, such as that "two thirds of white Freedom Riders (activists who rode interstate buses to protest the segregation of public transport in the segregated South)" were Jews, even though Jews then made up only 3 per cent of the total US population. But Tamkin also wants to remind us that there were

American Jews who "opposed civil rights or sat silently by. Some supported civil rights in word but not in deed". And there were Black Americans who "bristled at what they saw as American Jews' patronizing tone".

Thus, although American Jews still rightly pride themselves on their role in the civil rights era, the author stresses that "the whole picture is more complicated, and more blemished, than that. There was not wholehearted support from everyone in the community nor even the more prominent institutions". This is no doubt true, but also unsurprising. Has there ever been "wholehearted support" from a large community for any single cause, and particularly a fight against injustices that don't concern them directly? In her understandable determination to hold the Jewish community to account, Emily Tamkin paints an admirably nuanced picture, including much that is disturbing. It remains a pity that her own upsetting experiences sometimes make her feel the need to judge Jews by almost impossibly high standards.

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