



< Magazine: 26 November 2022



Tanya Gold

The rich complexity of Britain's Jewish population

There is no single community, Harry Freedman stresses, but a multitude of voices ranging from the liberal to the ultra-orthodox

📖 From magazine issue: 26 November 2022



The gifted rabbi Louis Jacobs, who was denied the leadership of Jews' College in the 1960s for 'his published views'. [Alamy]



Text



Comments



Britain's Jews: Confidence, Maturity, Anxiety

Harry Freedman

Bloomsbury, pp. 368, £20

Of all the European countries that Jews have lived in, none has been so welcoming as Britain. There is a caveat: the first blood libel was in Norwich, of all places, in 1144, and after Edward I expelled us in 1290 we had to wait almost 400 years for Oliver Cromwell to ask us back.

Jewish immigration to Britain was severely limited in the 1930s, as was immigration to British-controlled Palestine. Even so, Anglo-Jewry was – a handful of casualties from the occupied Channel Islands aside – the only community in Europe not ravaged by the Shoah, and Anglo-Jews are both peculiarly fortunate and haunted. My grandfather, a highly rational man, bought poison in 1940. He was going to kill his family if the Nazis reached them. My cousin sat Shiva (a wake for the dead) for her son when he married a non-Jew, because why do Hitler's work for him?

If we exist here in our fullness, it doesn't always feel that way. Perhaps this is our fullness, because what have we done with this security? Warsaw and Vilnius were lodestars of Jewish culture in a way that Golders Green has never managed – but, to be fair, they had the numbers.

My highly rational grandfather bought poison in 1940 with which to kill his family if the Nazis reached them

What are we, beyond lucky? Harry Freedman's task is to describe what we internalise – faith and trauma – and, though they are impossible to fully impart, his survey is detailed and fair. He explains our disparate tribes, our communal structures and our contradictory struggles: to integrate (for security) and not to integrate (for identity). We are model immigrants – we have the practice – and many fall away.

His central point is that there is no single Jewish community in Britain, though the appearance of one is a deliberate thing. Are we afraid that too many Jewish voices – there are only 250,000 of us, why worry? – will incite a pogrom? The last anti-Jewish riots were in 1947 in Glasgow, Manchester and Liverpool, a response to Jewish terrorists killing British soldiers in Palestine. We are a patchwork from liberal Judaism (gays, non-Jewish partners and Jews of patrilineal descent welcome, plus female rabbis) through Orthodox (Jews of matrilineal descent welcome, no female rabbis) to the ultra-Orthodox Charedim of Stamford Hill (female rabbis exist?). Jewish leftists and Tories despise each other as much as non-Jews of opposing politics do, and the Charedim, who will soon become the dominant group due to their large families, barely engage with the rest at all.

But the face we show the world smiles to the point of muteness. We fund political parties; we are noted philanthropists; the Chief Rabbi is having a sleepover with the King the night before the coronation. Our most famous synagogue, Bevis Marks in the City of London, looks like a church.

Freedman's main conclusions are that attachment to Israel is fraying within the younger generation, that assimilation is the same threat it has been since emancipation, and that, since Jeremy Corbyn, Anglo-Jews are more dogged in our defence than we were.

I have complaints: the misogyny of the Orthodox community gets about the same attention as the schism when Louis Jacobs, a gifted rabbi, was denied the leadership of Jews' College for refusing to say that the Torah is written by God. I would have liked to read more on Jews of colour, and leftist Jews, who complain that they are ignored by the mainstream, and Jews in the arts. Even so, for non-Jews, this explains us as well as is possible outside fiction. A Howard Jacobson novel – I suggest *Kalooki Nights* – will do the rest.

I think our life here is a pale triumph, with none of the rigour and colour of the old lands. But if our muteness is a sign of belonging and wondering if we are British or Jewish – or merely impersonating both badly – well, that is the condition of triumph. When I moved to Cornwall five years ago, I went to visit Mousehole School for my child. In the playground I found a plaque to commemorate 100 pupils of the Jewish Free School in London who were evacuated there in 1940. When I read in *The Cornishman* archives that most of Penzance came out to greet them I wept.