BRITAIN'S JEWS

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BRITAIN'S JEWS

Confidence, Maturity, Anxiety

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The New Confidence

When Philip Roth's alter ego Nathan Zuckerman asks his non-Jewish, English wife what the British think about the Jews, she replies sharply: 'Why do Jews make such a bloody fuss about being Jewish? That's what they think.'[1]

Few topics dominate conversations between Jews more than their Jewishness. With little effort they can attribute every facet of their life, their lot in this world, their personality, to the fact that they were born Jewish. Not that they are all of one mind regarding the matter. Of all the stereotypes about Jews, and there are many, perhaps the most accurate is their argumentative nature, particularly when arguing with each other. Two Jews, three opinions, as the old saying goes.

Contemporary literature is full of stereotypes about Jews. Some lend themselves to great literature. Think how diminished New York novels would be without their opinionated, outspoken Jewish characters, forever in and out of therapy. The Israelis too are a writer's dream: brash, assertive, always right even when they couldn't be more wrong. But when it comes to British Jews, as Naomi Alderman writes, their fear of being noticed compounds their natural British

reticence until they 'cannot speak, cannot be seen, value *absolute invisibility* above all other virtues'.[2] What on earth can be written about them?

Well, as it turns out, quite a lot. In our multicultural British society, Jews are a model of successful integration – unsurprisingly, since they have been here for so long. And they have changed substantially in the past two or three decades. Naomi Alderman's silent Jews are no longer silent. Or at least, they are a lot less silent than they used to be. Since the turn of the millennium, 2,000 years since the world's most famous Jew shattered his nation's private, exclusive relationship with their God, many of the old stereotypes that once applied to British Jews no longer seem relevant. Of course, it wasn't the magic number of the year 2000 that did this: Britain's Jews have changed in lockstep with British society. But the millennium is as good a reference point as any from which to mark that change.

One of the most noticeable things about today's British Jews is just how confident so many of them have become about being Jewish. Ray Simonson, Chief Executive of JW3 (of which more later), an ardent advocate of the new Jewish psyche, puts it like this: 'Growing up, I remember three words that Jewish adults said in hushed tones. They'd say: "Oh, you know the neighbours, have you heard they're getting *divorced*?" They wouldn't say it out loud in case it was contagious. They'd also say: "It's terrible news, you know she's got *cancer.*" And in a public space, they'd drop their voices whenever they spoke about someone being *Jewish*.'

They don't whisper the word 'Jewish' any more. Well, some still do, because Jews can't agree about anything. But many more of them are prepared to go out there today and celebrate their Jewishness. Or defend it. Or bemoan it in

public, or deliberately draw attention to the fact that they are Jews. When the comedian Josh Howie started talking to predominantly non-Jewish audiences about being Jewish, in what he describes as 'quite an abrasive way, unapologetically, unashamedly Jewish', he says that he could feel the energy shift in the room, the audience reassessing him, as if 'we've now got to put you into a different box'. It even happened when he wasn't drawing attention to his Jewishness. He recalls doing a show in Edinburgh based on his teenage years, growing up in the 1980s, when HIV was constantly at the top of the media agenda. 'I deliberately didn't say anything in the show about being Jewish. But a reviewer wrote a piece about how I was Jewish, using my Jewishness like I was some sort of hypochondriac.'

Howie is part of a long tradition of British Jewish comedians, a star cast headed by the likes of Sid James, Peter Sellers, Bud Flanagan, and Marty Feldman. But Howie was one of the first to overtly trumpet his Judaism. Unlike in the USA, where Jews are much more visible and far less reticent about announcing their Judaism, earlier British Jewish comics were discreet about being Jewish. 'My grandmother's generation would say: "Assimilate, don't rock the boat." And in some ways that has served us well as a community. But I think there was a danger in that, being so quiet or silent lent itself to conspiracy theories and to people's lack of knowledge of the Jewish community.' Howie says that the events of the past few years, the political and media focus on anti-Semitism, have forced young British Jews to take a stand, to say unapologetically, 'I am Jewish and I'm not going to put up with this. We don't have to hide or apologize any more. And we demand recognition for ourselves in those spaces, around identity politics or wherever, where it is said that racism can't

occur towards Jews. Maybe it doesn't come naturally to us, or we don't want to do it. And I don't know how older Jews or the Jewish community feel about it. But I guess what I'm trying to say is, we're more willing to pick a fight now.'

The growing confidence of Britain's Jews, at least among those under the age of 50, is partly a consequence of the zeitgeist. Identity matters today: we are supposed to be uninhibited in asserting who we are, our ethnicity, sexuality and origins. Jews, particularly young Jews, are no longer afraid to be proud of their identity.

But identity politics is only one factor in explaining the new confidence of Britain's Jews. More prosaically, Jews in Britain no longer feel as if they are an immigrant population. They no longer need to strive to establish themselves within the host community. It is nearly a century and a half since the great waves of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe changed the British perception of Jews forever, and although many Jewish families in Britain arrived more recently, a good number trace their ancestry back to that time. Of course, it is too easy to generalize, and every family has a different story, but broadly the immigrant generations were too busy trying to keep their heads down and establish themselves to care about matters of identity. Anyway, they knew only too well who they were, they'd been outsiders in the lands where they were born, why should it be any different here?

Their children were different. They were ambitious. Shrugging off the old ways, they strove to improve themselves economically and to fit in socially, dragging themselves out of the inner-city, immigrant ghettos in London, Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham and Leeds, propelling themselves towards the suburbs. They built their communities quietly, grateful for the freedoms of worship and expression that

Britain offered, rarely poking their heads above the parapet, raising their children according to the adage first coined in the nineteenth century: as Englishmen of the Mosaic persuasion. 'Come for tea, Come for tea, Oh my people,' they joked, deliberately misquoting Isaiah's 'Comfort ye, comfort ye.'[3]

Still, they could never just be British. Anti-Semitism at home, both interpersonal and institutional, then the rise of the Nazis abroad drove home the message that they were different. After the Second World War they listened with horror as accounts of what had happened during the Shoah gradually emerged, each report more devastating than its predecessor. Although the extent of the slaughter was already being reported in 1942, for reasons that Richard Bolchover eloquently explains in his book *British Jewry and the Holocaust*, few in Britain during the war years were able fully to grasp the reality of what was happening, to comprehend its horror or the extent of the devastation.[4] Even in the years immediately following the Shoah their inability to come to terms with the events was compounded by the incapacity of many survivors to disclose the full extent of their trauma. The trials at Nuremburg, Anne Frank's diary and the early writings of survivors like Primo Levi gave some sense of the enormity, but it took years for many of the personal stories to be told, and for the unspeakable depth of the tragedy to finally sink in.

British Jews' incomprehension was compounded by events in Palestine, where forces of the British mandate and Zionist paramilitary troops were caught up in a spiral of violence. In 1946, in a reaction to the wholesale round-up of Zionist agitators, Jewish terrorists from the terrorist organization Irgun Zvi Leumi bombed the British administrative headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, killing 91 people. The

following year the Irgun retaliated against the execution of three of their members by capturing and hanging two British sergeants. The British public reacted with fury. Anti-Jewish riots broke out in Manchester, Glasgow and Liverpool. British Jews were conflicted. How to reconcile the promise of an independent Jewish homeland with terrorism perpetrated by their kinsfolk against the nation that had given them shelter?

The distress of British Jews was made even worse when it transpired that the country which had offered so many of them a home was now turning away boatloads of Holocaust survivors from the ports of Palestine, sending them to displaced persons' camps in Cyprus, or in some cases back to the devastated Europe from which they had fled. Leon Uris's best-selling book *Exodus*, and Otto Preminger's subsequent, eponymous movie, are fictionalized accounts of what really happened to one of these boats.

And if all that wasn't enough for Britain's post-war Jews, the realization was slowly dawning upon them that they were witnesses to the unfolding of a 2,000-year-old dream. When the United Nations voted for an independent Israel in November 1947, they created the first independent Jewish state since the first century BCE. As Britain's Jews entered the second half of the twentieth century, they hardly knew what to make of it all.

It wasn't just the Jews who were experiencing change. Britain was changing too. The National Health Service was created and the Welfare State greatly expanded. Opportunities opened up and social barriers came down. As they fell, the new generations of Jews cast away the defences their parents had erected for their self-protection. Growing up alongside their British peers, educated in British schools, living and working in a multicultural society, these new Jews were comfortable