

# extra

## Abraham to Ali G

*All things Jewish condensed into a pithy, insightful book*

ADI BLOOM

THE TALMUD tells the following story. A man said to Rabbi Hillel: "Teach me the entire Torah while I'm standing on one foot." Rabbi Hillel replied: "Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to you. The rest is commentary. Now go and study it." Were Rabbi Hillel an RE teacher in a modern school, he might have said: "Don't bully the geeky kids. Now go away and read a book called *Judaism: all that matters*. It's all in there."

*Judaism: all that matters* really does cover everything. Its author, Keith Kahn-Harris, has a talent for pithy summary, condensing all things Jewish, from Abraham to Ali G (pictured below), into 150 pages.

How much of modern Jewish life, for example, is summed up in this joke: "Two Jews are shipwrecked on a desert island. A year later, a ship comes to pick them up and finds three synagogues. The ship's captain asks one of the Jews why there are three synagogues. He answers: 'One for him, one for me, and one that neither of us would be seen dead in.'"

But there is a lot that's serious here, too. Kahn-Harris deals with the chosen-people issue in a single line: "Being chosen does not mean that Jews are superior to other people." (For the record: it simply means more laws to follow.)

And, in one paragraph, he summarises most of modern British Jewry: they (full disclosure: we) circumcise their sons, avoid pork and shellfish at home, go to synagogue at least a couple of times a year and fast on the Day of Atonement.

By page 50, we have covered the sacking of the Second Temple, the compilation of the Talmud, the laws of keeping kosher, festivals, prayers, dress and the essence of Jewish belief ("It is perfectly common for even Orthodox Jews to be, if not atheists, then relatively unconcerned about the existence of God").

By page 83, we have reached the Holocaust and I am slightly out of breath. Then we move on to the modern state of Israel, at which point Kahn-Harris's tone of studied neutrality becomes that of a man tiptoeing over particularly fragile eggshells.

Given how well-considered the book is, it is a shame that the editing process lets it down. We have "platted" and "sting in the tale", alongside the misuse of "decimated". And to say that the Nazis were responsible for the "euthanasia" of the mentally ill is simply offensive. Errors such as these, unfortunately, suggest that the book is less kosher than it actually is.

*Judaism: all that matters* is published by Hodder and Stoughton. Find out more at [www.allthatmattersbooks.com](http://www.allthatmattersbooks.com).



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