

# Jewish chronicles

KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

Geoffrey Alderman

BRITISH JEWRY SINCE  
EMANCIPATION

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It is hard to resist the temptation to write the history of the Jews in Britain as a success story. While Jews in medieval England faced a calamitous sequence of blood libels, massacres and, in 1290, expulsion, their readmission under Oliver Cromwell initiated an apparently happier sequence of events.

Jews in England (then Britain) faced little of the extreme violence and persecution that many of their Continental counterparts had to deal with. Not that British anti-Semitism was insignificant, but it slowed down rather than prevented the gradual process of emancipation that took place in the nineteenth century. Britain's current Jewish community is fairly small – less than 300,000 according to the latest census – but is well integrated, largely prosperous and educated, and with excellent access to networks of influence and cultural capital in the country at large.

Unsurprisingly, then, discussion by and about British Jews has often been celebratory. The gentrified “cousinhood” that led much of the Jewish communal infrastructure until well into the post-war period encouraged British Jews to be grateful to their country and to act with appropriate decorum, discretion and patriotism. Historians such as Cecil Roth whiggishly recounted the triumphant progress of acculturation into British society. Today, the Jewish community is often held up as a “model minority” that forms a reproach to less “civilized” minorities.

Yet in the past few decades, writers on British Jewry have largely rejected this celebratory tone, emphasizing the insecurity of the community, threatened as it is by challenges including assimilation and intermarriage. There is also the menace posed by a fresh tide of anti-Semitism. Many community leaders fear that British Jewish life is too complacent to sustain itself into the future.

Recent historians of British Jewry have played an important role in the development of this sobering discourse. Figures such as David Cesarani, Tony Kushner and Anthony Julius have shown how British anti-Semitism was and remains a far from trivial phenomenon. The history of working-class British Jewish radicalism – which was much more confrontational towards fascism than the “official” British Jewish leadership during the 1930s – has been recovered and celebrated by William Fishman, among others.

Geoffrey Alderman has been one of the key figures in initiating and sustaining a critical approach to the British Jewish past and present. As the author of *Modern British*

*Jewry* (1992), the standard work on the subject, and as a prolific contributor to the *Jewish Chronicle* and other publications, he is an inescapable figure whose work anyone with an interest in British Jewry will inevitably confront at some point.

The core of *British Jewry Since Emancipation* is a revised version of *Modern British Jewry*, with a substantial extra chapter taking the story up to the present. Alderman's approach to British Jewish history has not changed in the updating. Although he doesn't entirely neglect social history and the wider British context, his principal interest lies with the internal political history of the community. In particular, he focuses on the ways in which unrepresentative elites have consistently tried – and mostly failed – to impose their will on communal institutions in the face of the community's diversity.

It is an old story: the old Anglo-Jewish gentry who attempted to smother the radicalism and difference of the Eastern European Jews who came to the country at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's endless failed attempts first to suppress and then to marginalize Reform Judaism from the middle of the nineteenth century; the failed attempts to resist the growth of Zionism in the Board of Deputies (the British Jewish representative body) in the pre-war period.

The new final chapter details more recent struggles and schisms: Jonathan Sacks's

catastrophic failures in the 1990s to maintain a balance between resurgent ultra-Orthodox Judaism to his right, and assertive non-Orthodox Judaism to his left; the growth of a new “secret” oligarchy that sought in the 2000s to bypass the Board of Deputies via the establishment of the rival Jewish Leadership Council; the religious polarization that has led to a host of major and minor conflicts.

Alderman handles new and old controversies with relish. He is as much a communal scourge and satirist as a historian. This leads him to dwell too much on certain relatively trivial episodes – if you are interested in boardroom struggles at the *Jewish Chronicle*, this book is definitely for you – while overlooking some more substantial matters. There is, for example, only one passing mention in a footnote of the Limmud conference, a source of growing cultural and educational vitality since the 1980s. Although Alderman ends the book by judging British Jewry in positive terms, his discussion doesn't achieve much of a balance between the community's problems and triumphs.

This is an often narrow study, albeit a highly entertaining one, about what the author considers a sometimes eccentric but ultimately lovable body of people. Geoffrey Alderman's parochialism is perhaps the point: the very comfort and success that Jews have found in Britain has given them the space to concentrate on their own internal struggles. While methodologically the book cries out for more context, as a piece of writing *British Jewry Since Emancipation* gives an authentic flavour of the interests and obsessions of British Jews.