

DWELLERS

Keith Kahn-Harris examines the dialectic between stability and creativity among British Jews.

Two sociological categories that can help in developing a fresh perspective on British Jewry are that of the ‘dweller’ and the ‘seeker’:

*‘Dwellers live in a stable place and feel secure within its territory; for them the sacred is fixed, and spirituality is cultivated through habitual practice within the familiar world of a particular tradition. Not that they are untouched by social change, but they are relatively well-anchored amid the flux. By contrast, seekers explore new vistas and negotiate among alternative, and at times confusing, systems of belief and practice; for them, the sacred is fluid and portable, and spirituality is likened unto a process or state of becoming. The language of the journey fits their experience.’*¹

The distinction between the dweller and the seeker has proved extremely helpful in understanding ‘moderately engaged’ British Jews. These are the backbone of British Jewry, the 40–60% ‘in the middle’, between those who observe orthodoxy on one side, and those with little or no Jewish involvement on the other. They are the ‘twice a year’ Jews, who more often than not join a synagogue but are not heavily involved in synagogue leadership. They give to Jewish causes but do not serve as leaders of Jewish charities. They visit Israel but do not speak Hebrew and will not make aliyah. At home they may or may not eat pork or shellfish but will happily eat in non-kosher restaurants. They will send their children to Jewish day schools or chedarim but would be disconcerted if one of them became frum. They live near other Jews but also have non-Jewish friends. The moderately engaged are the ultimate target for Jewish organisations who want them as donors and participants.

One such mainstream organisation, the United Jewish Israel Appeal (UJIA), commissioned the American sociologist Steven Cohen and myself to conduct a study on the attitudes and identities of moderately engaged British Jews. This study, which was published in 2004², drew on in-depth interviews with a sample of moderately engaged Jews together with a survey of moderately engaged Jewish parents. (I should point out that the conclusions I draw out from the study in this article are my own.)

The research found that moderately engaged British Jews were predominantly dwellers. Further,

the typical ‘dweller’ was happy to belong in British society and to the British Jewish community.

Jewishness isn’t something dwellers think about much. The following exchange, with a married woman in her 30s with two children living in London, was fairly typical:

Q: ... we didn’t mention spirituality and God. How do you feel about that sort of side to Judaism?

A: Not a lot. I’m not a deep thinker you see. I mean you’re asking me questions that mean a lot of deep thinking. I’m not like that. Is there a God? Do I think there is a God? Is that what you’re asking me?

Q: No, no. I’m just asking how you feel about those sorts of questions.

A: Spiritual. What do I get out of being Jewish? It’s just my way of life and that’s it. I don’t think about it. I am Jewish. End of story.

The ‘ethnic’ desire to participate in the comforts of belonging, rather than a deeply-felt spiritual quest, propels such dwellers to attend synagogue and their comfort zone is limited to that Jewish practice experienced in childhood. The dweller orientation is characterized by a lack of any desire to question.

Fewer in number but far more significant in terms of impact are the Seekers. Seekers perceive Judaism as a journey and question everything along the way. What does being Jewish mean? Where do they fit in?

Many seekers feel isolated by their desire to innovate, from the single mother who tried to organize a women-only Megillah reading to the gay

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man seeking a sympathetic community.

The sense of comfort and Britishness felt by most dwellers testifies to the careful work of communal leaders, as far back as the eighteenth century, to ensure the smooth integration of Jews into British society. Faced with the influx of Eastern European

X SEEKERS

immigrants in the late nineteenth century, institutions such as the Board of Deputies and the United Synagogue made strenuous efforts to prove the loyalty and good conduct of Jews in Britain.

The model of Jewishness that came to dominate was that of a discreet private activity, pursued with decorum.

Other tendencies in Anglo-Jewry such as the Jewish labour movement had very different ideas about what it meant to be Jewish in Britain. But alternative models of being British and Jewish fell away in the post-war period as the British Jewish community became well-integrated into British society and the majority of its members joined the ranks of the middle classes.

If dwelling was originally nurtured by the Anglo-Jewish establishment by the early 1990s, there was considerable disquiet at the rate of assimilation and the perceived moribundity of British Jewish institutions. Since then, Jewish communal leaders have made considerable efforts to promote 'Jewish continuity', to renew existing Jewish institutions and to build new ones (particularly schools). Their aim is to challenge complacency and to promote a sense that all Jews are on a kind of journey that requires thought as well as commitment. This desire for a more active and dynamic Jewish community does not sit well with the preponderance of the dwellers among moderately engaged Jews. The majority of them simply do not have that 'itch' that impels the pleasures and frustrations of the Jewish journey.

But even if the dominant communal agenda has shifted away from the nurturing of dwelling, today's Jewish communal leaders are still suspicious of Seekers as evident in British reactions to Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen's study of moderately engaged American Jews, *The Jew Within* (2000). Noting the dominance of seekers over dwellers in the US, Cohen and Eisen argued that the primary commitment of moderately engaged Jews in the US is to the 'sovereign self': to the self's journey through life in which Jewish identification and commitment forms a negotiable part. At a conference held by the UJIA in 2002, a number of speakers argued that the primacy of the sovereign self is detrimental to Judaism.

Chief Rabbi Sacks argued that 'this is not something Judaism can endorse ... We have obstinately to resist it. We believe in the primacy of community'.

Since the 1990s, mainstream Jewish communal institutions have tried to rejuvenate themselves in ways that stimulate the interest and imaginations of the dwellers while drawing the seekers into the community. The same period has also seen other initiatives that are unambivalently targeted at seekers. New organisations such as the Jewish Community Centre and Jewdas are bringing new perspectives on contemporary Jewish life, offering programmes designed to include Jews marginalized from the community. This is also a time of great activity in the Jewish creative arts, particularly in Jewish music where bands such as Oi Va Voi are the toast of Jewish and non-Jewish critics. Such activity is ideal for seekers: it requires little commitment and can be dipped into by individual seeking Jews on their individual Jewish journeys.

In the struggle to engage both dwellers and seekers in the Jewish community, we see the timeless push and pull of old and new. The potential mutual benefit of both orientations to communal life is also plain to see. Dwelling ensures stability, a sense of community and attachment. Seeking ensures creativity, meaning and dynamism. Today's British Jewish community is gradually becoming much more diverse and better equipped to engage with different types of Jews. Looking back over Jewish history, it is perhaps this diversity that has vouchsafed the survival of a meaningful Judaism through the millennia.

1 Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof *Bridging Divided Worlds; Generational Cultures in Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 39.

2 Steven M. Cohen and Keith Kahn-Harris, *Beyond Belonging: The Jewish Identities of Moderately Engaged British Jews* (London: UJIA / Profile Books, 2004).

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