

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BRITAIN: IT STILL DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT

Keith Kahn-Harris

MY PARENTS ARE CURRENTLY going through an extensive programme of purging their over-stuffed loft of junk. Amid the vast stacks of rubbish, they have uncovered a few gems. Some of these are of interest only to me and my family – my old school books and comics for example – but others are of real historical value. In the latter category is an issue of *Centre* the magazine of the North Western Reform Synagogue (commonly known now and then as Alyth Gardens) from June 1977. My mother kept it as it contains an article praising the work of my grandmother on the Ladies Guild. This was nice to read but what really caught my attention was the front page article by Rabbi Dow Marmur entitled 'Needed: A Cultural Revolution in British Reform'.

In the small world of British Reform, Dow Marmur is one of the outstanding stars. He was born in Poland in 1925, survived the war in the Soviet Union, went to school in Sweden and studied for the rabbinate at Leo Baeck College in London. From 1969-1983 he was rabbi of Alyth, after which he served a congregation in Toronto before making Aliyah to Israel in 2000, where he still lives.

As a writer, Marmur was one of British Reform's visionaries and his June 1977 article exemplifies this.

In his article he condemned the lack of study opportunities in the UK Reform movement and the 'Jewish illiteracy' of most Reform Jews. He called for greater emphasis to be placed on education, a refusal to accept the 'anti-intellectual' tendency of British Jewry and he suggested that perhaps we needed a 'cultural revolution' in British Reform and 'to attack the humdrum common sense approach and demand greater idealism, more learning, more passion from those that lead us'. Strong words.

Thinking about the Reform movement and British Jewry as a whole in 2008, it is clear that there is a lot that Marmur would welcome today. We

have had something of a revolution. Limmud started in 1980 and has grown to be a powerhouse of learning, making Jewish study accessible and attractive across the community. Huge sums have been invested in Jewish education, with primary and secondary day schools opening and the numbers of Jewish children at Jewish schools greatly increasing. The Reform movement has been part of this revolution, with Jewish learning now at the top of the agenda and initiatives such as Living Judaism, the Centre for Jewish Education (now the Department of Educational and Professional Development at Leo Baeck College) and of course Jeneration renewing the staid world of British Reform.

There is more: Jewish arts and culture have also been invigorated and renewed. The Jewish Community Centre, Jewish Book Week, The Jewish Film Festival and a host of other institutions are making Jewish arts and culture ever more accessible, ever more dynamic. The 'Simcha On The Square' held in the last two summers in Trafalgar Square and featuring a host of great Jewish music acts, would have been inconceivable even a couple of decades ago.

In short, British-Jewry is more exciting, more dynamic, more engaged than it was in 1977. But I wonder whether we can really speak of a 'cultural revolution'. Culture, in its broadest sense, signifies a way of life, a mode of living, the 'texture' of interaction. Whereas institutions can renew themselves, programmes can be instituted, events put on, changing the culture of British-Jewry is a much more difficult, much slower task. Undoubtedly, looking at the wide enthusiasm for learning, the greater interest in Jewish arts and culture, the greater dynamism and self-confidence, all these point towards significant changes, but there is much about the culture of British-Jewry that has barely changed at all.

Consider the ways in which British

Jews relate to one another. Yes, there is greater awareness of religious pluralism and more and more young Jews describe themselves as 'post-denominational', but vicious internecine warfare still erupts within the community. Orthodox-Progressive collaboration is still minimal and tensions over Israel are, if anything, even worse. Disputes over the acceptability of criticism of Israel frequently blow up into incredibly angry bouts of verbal warfare. Compare the letters pages of the *Jewish Chronicle* today with those of thirty years ago. The issues debated may differ, but the viciousness continues.

There are also deeper continuities in British-Jewry that are less often mentioned, but have yet to be the subject of revolutionary changes. The lack of accountability in many Jewish organisations continues. They may have got better at publicity and marketing, but there is a continuing reluctance on the part of many Jewish institutions to open themselves up to scrutiny. Consider how the internet 'revolution' bypassed much of the community (Jeneration being one honourable exception). Here was an opportunity for Jewish organisations to open up and engage with the Jewish public. But look at how late many of them were to establish a presence on the web – mentioning no names, one of the biggest Israel charities only set up a website in 2002 – and how many Jewish websites contain little information and are badly designed. Consider also how much Jewish communal activism is often accompanied by cliquishness, mistrust and plain bad manners. Again mentioning no names, when I recently visited one central Jewish organisation for an unplanned meeting, the receptionist – whom I knew – left me on the pavement for 5 minutes before I was buzzed in.

When we look back at how the community has changed over time, we shouldn't look only to the institutions built, the activities put on, but to the deeper structures of British-Jewry. It is in these aspects of the British Jewish community, the way Jewish life is lived, what being Jewish *feels like*, that we still await a cultural revolution. In these matters, Dow Marmur might have cause to note how little has really changed when he looks back on what he wrote in 1977 ■

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