

jpr / dialogue

New Conceptions of Community

What is British Jewish politics?

Keith Kahn-Harris

Politics is an inescapable part of human existence. It concerns the way that humans organize themselves, in particular how they organize themselves within institutions and units of governance. Above all, it concerns the way humans interact with power.

Dating back at least to the ancient Greeks (whose word ‘polis’, meaning state or city, provides the root of our word politics), political theory has a long tradition of defining and understanding what politics is, how it functions and how it should function. In a modern lay sense though, politics has two principle kinds of definitions: one, a minimal definition, focuses on Politics (with a capital ‘P’) as a process confined to state and local government. The other, maximal definition, focuses on politics (with a small ‘p’) as an omnipresent fact of life, bound up in the manifold ways in which power circulates in everyday life (‘the personal is political’).

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We can find the British Jewish community in both definitions of politics. In the minimal definition, British Jews are involved in national and local politics as individuals, as Jews and as a community. In the maximal definition, British Jewish life is a maze of practices in which power is exercised and resisted.

My concern in this brief essay is not to analyse British Jewish politics according to either definition, or indeed, according to some other definition that draws on both. Rather, I want to question whether and how far the British Jewish community has an *acknowledged*

politics. Do British Jews see themselves as being involved in a political process when they interact with other Jews in Jewish contexts? Is there a tacitly or openly agreed understanding of what British Jewish politics might mean?

At one level, such questions are easy to answer. It is likely that most people who have been involved in a Jewish organization at more than a token level will, at some time or other, have reflected on the politics of that organization. In any synagogue there are likely to be factions, personalities, disagreements and controversies, which, even if they are not antagonistic and bitter, will certainly ‘feel’ political at some time or other. However, the inescapable fact of the politics of communal institutions does not mean that reflection on that politics will be anything more than fleeting. Indeed, in many Jewish contexts, an acknowledgement of politics is something that is actively resisted.

I would argue that in much of the British Jewish community, politics is in ‘bad taste’. In synagogues a *macher* (a person with power and influence who gets things done) who is too overt in political scheming is likely to be viewed with suspicion. On a community-wide level inter-denominational politicking is widely practised, but at the same time, in public discourse it tends to be attempts to prevent inter-denominational politics (such as the ‘Stanmore Accords’) that are emphasized. The Board of Deputies has a quasi-parliamentary structure and its deputies elect a president and vice-president, but there is nothing resembling parties, and deputies rarely face contested election fights in their own communities. When disputes between deputies do break out, they are often all the more bitter for there being no accepted model over how different ‘parties’ to a dispute should

behave. Even those few organizations that are openly political, such as the UK branches of Israeli political parties, tend to be low-key and poorly supported.

In short, there is a disparity between the *de facto* inevitability and ubiquity of British Jewish communal politics and the degree to which this politics is openly recognized. British Jewish politics is largely a matter for quiet, behind the scenes activity.

This reticence is perhaps a function of a tacit assumption that politics is antithetical to community. To be openly political is seen to be to seek to divide, to create strife and discord that threatens to rupture communal harmony. In part this may derive from long-held feelings of insecurity that, as a minority in British society, the Jewish community must show a united front and that division can only equal weakness.

The assumption that small minorities need to present a united front is not necessarily illegitimate. The problem is that the lack of politics can create problems more serious than those it is designed to combat. If Jewish communal politics is not acknowledged, politics will still continue, but it will continue in ways that can be corrosive. If those who disagree legitimately with a particular direction the community takes can only be seen to disagree if they do so privately, this increases the likelihood that, rather than accept their marginality, they will resort to attacking the community. I am thinking here about the position of those who disagree with communal support for Israel. Contrary to the commonly made accusation that the community 'suppresses' debate, it is more the case that debate is possible if it is done quietly and behind the scenes. The trouble is that some will not accept only being able to disagree privately, while in public maintaining a facade of unity. Without a legitimate political process through which to debate communal policies, those British Jews who are critical of Israel have often resorted to attacking the community from the outside.



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It is essential to begin the process of rethinking British Jewish politics. The tacit assumption that politics and community are antithetical needs to be questioned. In any but the tiniest, most homogeneous community, differences of opinion are inevitable and there has to be a way of dealing with these differences without the dissolution of the community. What models might there be for a community whose political system could allow for the mediation of difference? What kind of political language do British Jews need to embrace in order to function without undue rancour?

One source of inspiration might be parliamentary democracy itself. The Board of Deputies is structured as a kind of parliament, but it lacks one crucial element of parliamentary democracy – an official opposition. When a politician who has been democratically elected speaks for a country, region or locality, it is clear that even if they govern for all, they were only elected by some. To be a leader in a democracy is to publicly affirm that not everyone agrees. Indeed, when democracies work best (and admittedly they often do not) the opposition plays an important role in the democratic process, scrutinizing the executive and acting as a constant rebuke to delusions of unanimity. Political opponents may disagree vehemently but in the best parliamentary democracies, this does not stop them respecting each other as individuals; nor does the fact of divided political loyalties necessarily prevent the cohesiveness of the nation.

The parliamentary model is, of course, not applicable in its entirety to the Board of Deputies or other British Jewish communal organizations. The model does suggest, though, that politics need not be antithetical to community and that difference can be managed civilly. British Jewish community organizations should consider how they might create structures within which a wider spectrum of views might be aired than is currently the case. Above all, they should not fear politics but embrace it.



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