

# 14 Culture

## Stereotype Busting

by Winston Pickett

If you're writing a book and calling it 'What Does a Jew Look Like?', you'd better be prepared for the kind of response you may get. Depending on who's asking, the question could come out as, "What are the distinguishing characteristics of a Jew – as based on their physiognomy, behaviour and appearance?" It's a slippery slope. Hair, face, body, clothes, gestures, habits crop up. Stereotypes pour forth unbidden. Not all of them positive.

On the other hand, if one acknowledges that Jews have lived in every conceivable geographical and ethnic milieu for millennia, and therefore reflect a myriad of Diaspora experiences and appearances, one could easily retort, "What doesn't, in fact, a Jew look like?"

These are some of the thoughts with which the authors of this handsome, compact 80-page book by Keith Kahn-Harris and Robert Strothard grappled when they organised their work. The result is an accomplishment that turns out to have been the result of serendipitous alchemy.

Kahn-Harris is a well-known writer who has published widely on issues of Jewish concern, especially to British Jewry. A research fellow at Birkbeck College who directs the European Jewish Research Archive for Jewish Policy Research, he was prompted to dig into his subject after an abiding dissatisfaction with the media's knee-jerk selection of an almost 'universally' represented stock photo of two male Charedi Jews to illustrate a story – even where totally inappropriate.

Early in his research, Kahn-Harris sought to track down some of these stock photographs readily available from Getty Images, one of the largest photo libraries, which media outlets can instantly download and reproduce for a fee or by subscription. In so doing, he made contact with one of its professional photographers, Robert Strothard, who, while not himself Jewish, had also become frustrated with how his images were used to stereotype British Jewry.

With that, a partnership was born. The two collaborators, each from different disciplines and orientations, set out to complicate and add much-needed nuance to the way Jews are represented in the media.

The result is a revealing and prejudice-busting exposition, even when readers think they recognise some of the people portrayed. This adds to the book's intrigue, particularly because none of the subjects' family names are given, although their geographical designations are. Even if the reader can identify a participant with absolute certitude, such as Brighton & Hove's own Fiona Sharpe (pp.18-19), the details contained in their self-portraits are guaranteed to evoke an 'I-did-not-know-that' response. We sit back, recalibrate and reflect, so that self-disclosure adds

another layer of complexity to the people we think we know.

As a sociologist, Kahn-Harris explains that he set out to include as wide a swathe of British Jewry as possible: "Haredi, modern orthodox, progressive; old and young; male, female and non-binary; cisgender and transgender; Zionist and non-Zionist; left-wing and right-wing; from London and from the rest of the country; Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi and other ethnicities..."

At one juncture his efforts at comprehensiveness faced a reality-check, however. In order to be truly representative, he and photographer Strothard would need hundreds of posed photographs and accompanying testimonials. Keeping things lean and broadly reflective of Jewish diversity would have to do. For the most part, it does so admirably well, aided by a useful glossary at the end.

But it's the visual aspect that's key. As a photographer, Strothard offers portraits entirely of his subject's choosing, reflecting comfort level and how they want to be seen by the world. The result is, as much as possible, an authentic portrayal of Jewish identity, journeys and ways of being in the world. Moreover, while only 29 Jews are self-profiled, there is enough detail and complexity for a reader wanting to get a sense of the depth of the strata of Jewish life in the UK – both intuitively, on first blush, but also repeatedly, upon multiple returns.

"By placing the subjects in their preferred context and by allowing them to define their Jewish lives in their own terms, they cease becoming representative of anything but themselves", Kahn-Harris said. "They become Jewish people."

This may be the book's singular most important contribution and utility. By offering stand-alone visual portraits that spell Jewish variety, it's the stories that make the reader want to go back and look again, raising questions, opening doors and demanding reconsideration on every page.

As such, this is a book that is good for the Jews, giving us a more nuanced composite picture of ourselves – and hopefully for everyone else, particularly the media – who seek to write about us and understand us. Maybe, just maybe, they'll be prepared to ask what a Jew, really and truly, happens to look like today.

