

# Why This Sociologist Thinks Jews Should Stop Seeking Exceptionalism and Start Being Boring

**English writer and sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris is concerned that Jews' prominence in the world is turning them into a target – but not in the way you think. In his new book, 'Everyday Jews,' he battles for the right of his people to experience ordinary life**

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Upon landing in Warsaw's international airport, Keith Kahn-Harris falls into a "foul mood." He's come to Poland on an organized tour of descendants of Jews who perished in the Holocaust, but instead of leaping at the opportunity to connect with "that addictive morbidity of which Jewish writers' careers are made," he's overwhelmed by anger. Not at the organizers of the visit, not at the other participants, not even at the country whose soil is saturated with the blood of millions of victims.

"It was life that was missing," he writes in his new book, "Everyday Jews: Why the Jewish People Are Not Who You Think They Are" (published in Britain this month by Icon Books, U.S. edition out in June). "Life in all its mundanity and strange beauty; life as ordinary, routine, yet somehow extraordinary; the sort of life that we only notice when it is absent."

It was a feeling that had accompanied him for years – something he'd felt "in the kishkes" – but it was only on the trip to Poland, in May 2023, that he was able to find the words to describe it. "In many respects it was a great trip," says Kahn-Harris, a sociologist, prolific writer with nine books behind him, an in-demand speaker and a "professional Jew," as he styles himself.

"It was wonderful to be able to mourn my lost relatives," he says in a telephone interview from London. "They were quite distant relatives, but still, they had nobody else [to mourn them]. But I had this experience of feeling like I was removed from everyday life in Poland. That I was visiting a place that was special to us, that was not part of the world."

His anger had welled up earlier. When [Jeremy Corbyn](#) was head of the Labour Party, Kahn-Harris, who's politically on the left, spoke out about the antisemitism that was attributed to Corbyn and sections of his party, including in articles in like-minded media outlets like the Guardian and the New Statesman. It's hard to accuse him of blind admiration for the ousted Labour leader, but his approach usually displayed restraint and moderation that were absent from the tempestuous public discourse on the subject.

"Jews were very, very public, pro or against Corbyn," he notes. "We were a major political issue. And part of me felt that, you know, whoever's view prevailed, whoever won, this sort of publicness would have some unintended consequences."

After [October 7](#), these ostensibly disparate events coalesced into a clear, articulated argument. "It was this horrible sense that whoever won, we'd all lost. And I don't mean just in geopolitical terms, or in relation to the Palestinians, or what Israel should be. But I didn't think that it was good for us to be so prominent in the world. I thought the way that we were prominent in the world accentuated some sides of what it was to be Jewish, but

downplayed other bits. And I started to worry that we were going to be hollowed out, that we would be so public that there would be nothing left for ourselves."

This point of view is not self-evident; it even goes against the instincts ingrained over generations regarding Jewish existence in a hostile and often dangerous world. Nor does it contain, for those who may have wondered momentarily, a sense of blaming the victim. Kahn-Harris is in fact pointing to a convention, almost a decree of fate, that "Jews often have to inhabit a space that is one of extreme seriousness, and removed from the normal things that people do.... I felt myself rebelling against that, even at the same time – I mean, you can feel more than one thing at once."

In the new book he tries to address the disparity between the two modes of Jewish existence. "The book was my attempt to try and work through those issues, to rebalance Jewish life – not that we retreat into a cave or anything like that, but that not everything has to be public, and that we should cherish also the less extraordinary sides of Jewish life."

He asked himself what he would think if he didn't know anything about Jews, other than how they are presented and talked about in popular culture. His conclusion: "Most people must have this bizarre idea of who we actually are. They would never imagine that Jews are capable of creating terrible, terrible music, or terrible, terrible food." In short, "Jewish existence is also about everyday life."

*You believe that Jews have internalized the distorted way that the world sees us, that we have accepted the image that's been formed across history, which holds that Jews are "important" and hence also "interesting."*

"Antisemitism, as most historical scholars of the subject have shown, isn't just hatred of Jews. It is that, of course, but it's also a way of explaining the world. In Christian Europe, we may have been dangerous, we may have been treated with suspicion or hatred, but we were a way of understanding good and evil, the place of Christianity in the world and Judaism as its dark other. It wasn't trivial, that kind of antisemitism, it made Jews significant."

Yet even when it's disconnected from antisemitism, this is our view of ourselves, says Harris-Kahn. "We have played an outsized role, certainly in Western civilization. We certainly played an outsized role in popular culture and in high culture. All of that is true, but we are not reducible to that, that is not all we are. And sometimes I think Jews themselves have got too used to emphasizing the extraordinary."

*So it's time to stop counting how many Nobel Prizes we have?*

"It's pretty hard not to count them, but it's not all that Israel is. You see that in Israeli hasbara [public diplomacy], which is often about trying to show how amazing the Jewish state is. But if you only understand Israel as a place of genius or as a place of evil, you don't really understand Israel at all. Certainly in the Diaspora, it's very difficult for Jews to just see Israel as another place; [that's the image] even if they spent a lot of time there."

*Actually, the endless talk about Jewish genius, Jewish exceptionalism, is a form of antisemitism. And Jews have also adopted a similar point of view.*

"I think it's probably inevitable. You take the missiles, if you like, that your enemy's throwing at you, and you refashion them and fire them back. When the non-Jewish world says, for example, that Israel is a source of evil in the world, Israelis and Diaspora Jews will say, 'No, look at these good things that Israel

has done.' I understand why this happens, but it also has side effects that are worth thinking about. We also have the option of refusing to fight in that way."

### Healthy pettiness

Kahn-Harris' way of coping in this context is to fight for his right to be boring. To engage in trivialities, to focus on the mundane aspects of life, to celebrate our ordinariness, to curb the obsession to excel in everything we do and not to be afraid of a little healthy pettiness. To bolster his case he references names ranging from Zionist history to American baseball, from the poet Yehuda Amichai to the Israeli invention of Bamba peanut puffs, from the quip attributed to David Ben-Gurion – "When we have a Jewish thief and a Jewish prostitute, we'll know we have a state" – to commercials featuring the late Israeli adwoman G. Yafit.

"Actually, a lot of what Jews do isn't of particularly high quality – and it would be surprising if it was, because most people are not high quality in everything they do," Kahn-Harris observes, and cites as an example the Maccabeats, an a cappella group formed by students from New York's Yeshiva University in 2007, which specialized in high-pathos songs in the spirit of Jewish tradition, without an iota of self-deprecating humor.

"I used to be very angry with that, because why should Jews do things second-best? And then I realized it's almost like family music. Of course it's mediocre. If it wasn't mediocre, you wouldn't be able to relate to it. We exaggerate the Jewishness of Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, even though they are incredible. But that's not symptomatic of people's everyday life. Most people live mediocre lives, and we should be able to enjoy that privilege, too."

Kahn-Harris is not alone in defending the advantages of being boring. For a few years an event called The Boring Conference was held in London, with participants being treated to short TED-like talks on subjects like sneezing, barcodes, the sounds made by vending machines, and types of elevators. Kahn-Harris himself spoke at the 2017 conference about the messages inside the Kinder Surprise chocolate eggs that kids love. The talk gave rise to a book, "The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language," which is a serious comparative discussion of linguistic traditions and their role in human communication.

The talks at the conference, and his book as well, showed "that boring things are really interesting" and that "there's a light in the small things that human beings do to keep the world going," Kahn-Harris says, adding, "This is why I'm interested in the Ringelblum Archive [a secret archive in the Warsaw Ghetto created by historian Emanuel Ringelblum, which documented Jewish life in Poland before and during the Nazi occupation], which I talk about in the book. Because the Ringelblum Archive wasn't just a cry of pain. It took hard work. It took administration. It took meetings. You know, all the boring bureaucratic things you have to do to keep a project going. And it shows us that the Holocaust was also doing things to help get through the day. It's very easy to forget, but even in the Warsaw Ghetto, that's what life is."

The Ringelblum Archive, whose historical value is not in dispute, is a permanent source of inspiration for Kahn-Harris in his work as a sociologist: "One thing that I learned is that the micro and the macro are connected. Nothing is truly trivial."

*Still, weren't you concerned that a book about the advantages of boredom would itself become boring?*

"Well, it's an impossible paradox. Of course, if I write a book, I'm going to try and make it entertaining and also surprising.

But at the same time, I'm talking about stuff that is not entertaining and is not surprising. It's just a paradox you have to live with. Maybe people will be a little more comfortable about not always talking about the extraordinary. Maybe I can make a small contribution to taking the temperature of the discourse down a little."

*Will the world allow us to be boring?*

"It's true to an extent that the world won't let us be boring. We're too notorious and we're too embedded in the world. But we can control something. We can control what we ourselves see as important and how we represent being Jewish." Still, he says, he has no magic formulas: "I think it will be centuries before we [Jews] become truly boring, if we ever can."

*It's not just the world. The book is contrary to everything that was hammered into us for generations: that our way to survive is to excel, get the highest grades, be better than everyone.*

"I'm not saying those were bad things. I would say, though, that everything in life comes with a cost, and the habit of being extraordinary becomes almost like an obsession. It's also not the case that we survived by being better. It was because we were able to exploit niches. We were pushed into niches, and we succeeded in those niches, because we were a literate culture and we were a globally connected culture, so of course we'd be good at banking, of course we'd be good at commerce.

"Certainly it's true that when Jews could be free, that huge desire to achieve led to some incredible things, but we also have to recognize what gets lost and how it can distort our views of who we are, and also distort non-Jews' views of who we are as well."

'Oh, God'

Kahn-Harris, 53, is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and a lecturer at Leo Baeck College, an institution of Progressive (Reform) Judaism, both of which are based in London. His wife Deborah is a Reform rabbi and Bible scholar; they have two children: a 22-year-old son and an 18-year-old daughter. Kahn-Harris' appearance – very long hair and a very long beard – allows him to mingle easily in two communities that have not one thing in common: Orthodox Jews and metalheads. He's a devoted fan of the musical genre and has written extensively on the subject.

During the time he spent in Israel as a Ph.D. candidate, he had the opportunity to become acquainted with the local metal scene ("I really liked Rabies Caste, a band of new immigrants from Russia that no longer exists"). More recently his favorite is Meshuggah, a Swedish band that does high-quality extreme metal and which, its name notwithstanding, has no connection with Judaism.

Kahn-Harris' critical occupation with metal doesn't prevent him from taking an interest in the annual Eurovision Song Contest – viewing the event has become a family pastime. Not surprisingly, Eurovision, and especially the 2024 contest, connects with his campaign to get Jews to fight for their right to be boring. After all, Israel has again become the divisive issue that dominates the event, and last year's show is remembered for the systematic abuse that Israel's Eden Golan endured from her competitors.

*Participating in Eurovision in the midst of a war was perceived in Israel as an opportunity to be normal, but Europe wouldn't let us.*

"It was a hugely upsetting time, for me as well. But Israel didn't try to be normal. They sent a normal singer, certainly, she's not an extraordinary singer – a very good one, but nothing more



than that. The song was about what happened on October 7, all being said in a coded sort of way, because Eurovision wouldn't let them be too direct. I felt very uncomfortable: Why did it have to be Israel that broke Eurovision? I didn't think anybody won there – the pro-Palestinians didn't win, Israel didn't win, we all lost."

But regardless of what you think about what Israel is doing in Gaza, Kahn-Harris says, "treating Israel as the foundation of the world, as the most important thing in the world, strikes me as very dangerous, really dangerous, and quite scary. And I don't think this year is necessarily going to be any better."

*Do you know who we're sending?*

"No, but it's another song about October 7, isn't it?"

*Yuval Raphael, [a survivor of the Nova music festival](#).*

"Oh, God."

After some thought, Kahn-Harris says: "I dread the fact that she will receive a huge amount of abuse – maybe not quite as bad as last time, but it will be bad. But I also don't think it's the smart thing for Israel to do [to send a survivor of the massacre], at this point, even though I know why they're doing it.

"I think these spaces of triviality, like Eurovision, are incredibly precious in the world. I think we need Eurovision. There are always all sorts of political issues about Eurovision, right?" He mentions Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, saying, "But the show kept going, and now it breaks, and it's the Jews who made it break."

Asked about his concerns over antisemitism in Britain, Kahn-Harris acknowledges that there was a sharp rise in the sentiment following October 7, and that the Jewish community is "very nervous." At the same time, he notes, "no one has been killed –

there haven't been extreme versions of antisemitism of that sort, but that could change any day. What I would say – and this is a very difficult argument to make, but I think it's an essential one – is that we are still carrying on. Antisemitism has not made the rest of Jewish life in Britain impossible.

"I've been to bar mitzvahs, I've been to services [at the synagogue], I've done all the things that I was planning on doing anyway, and so have other people. I think that the time to really worry will be when it becomes impossible, or much more difficult, to live that everyday life. We're not at that stage yet."

*Would you agree that the BBC is hostile to Israel in a way that often descends into antisemitism?*

"I'll give the same answer as I did about Eurovision. I don't want us to be the people that break the BBC. There is a campaign urging people to stop paying the [TV] license fee because of antisemitism. That's the kind of politics I worry a lot about. I don't see the BBC the way the organizers of this campaign do. And even if I did, should we keep putting ourselves at the center of national debates that exist anyway, even without Israel and Jews? Are we going to be the ones who [topple] them? That worries me a lot."

*Is there a fear that opposing approaches to the war in Gaza will cause a rift within the Jewish community itself?*

"There are forces that pull us apart and forces that push us together. In Britain, the hostages are a point of unity, whereas in Israel, to judge by what we see in the Knesset, they are a very divisive political issue. This will end at some point – the remaining hostages will be returned or they will be dead – and then it's the day after, and I don't think anyone knows what's going to happen. Speaking as a British Jew, I wonder what the unifying factor will be after that – if there is one. Divisions exist

within the Zionist camp, but while the hostages are there, it's almost like suspended animation."

*How did October 7 and the war affect you personally?*

"I'm not sure my experience is that much different to that of others. There's a huge amount of despair, of bleakness, of sadness. It's almost impossible to see a good future in the short or even medium term. I think, as I said, that we were seen as the foundational thing that explained the world. That was true before October 7, but now it's incredibly dangerous for us; not in the way we think – not in the sense of increasing antisemitism or the like, but in the sense that it threatens to distort the nature of Jewish existence.

"That Jewish existence is also about everyday life. The book expresses a yearning for a less public way of being Jewish, a less consequential way of being Jewish."

*It occurs to me that this can't happen as long as Israel exists.*

"I hope that's not true. In any event, I think maybe there is something else in the world that's happening that will become more important than Israel: climate change and disruption. Surely the disruption over the next few decades may mean that Israel becomes a little less significant. I could be wrong – I probably am wrong."

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