

Great Britain Tackles "Jewish Continuity"

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Like every other Jewish community in the world, British Jewry is quite unlike any other. It bears closest resemblance to other Commonwealth communities, such as Australia or Canada, and is less like the United States than our common language leads people to believe.

British Jews are fairly conservative. With a 60-70 percent synagogue affiliation rate, one would be justified in assuming that we Brits are a fairly religious lot; furthermore, about two thirds of those affiliated are members of Orthodox synagogues. The casual observer is likely to think therefore that we are passionately religious. However, the British model is much more nominal than that. The Establishment is mainstream Orthodox and, thus, if you do not care very much, you will probably join an Orthodox synagogue. To join one of the Progressive Movement's synagogues would suggest a deliberate reason for doing so. The middle-of-the-road, easy-going nature of centrist Orthodoxy in Britain has also meant that Conservative Judaism has not gained much of a foothold until fairly recently.

A recent in-depth survey on Jewish education in Britain estimated that about 30 percent of Jewish youngsters attend Jewish day schools. Such schools in Britain, however, may be a lot more loosely Jewish than some in other countries. The possibility of state funding of a school's operating costs gives a powerful incentive to schools to construct their curricula in line with the country's national curriculum; a school cannot obtain state aid unless it fits the requirements of this curriculum, thereby limiting or distorting the Jewish focus of the school. Fortunately, in Britain, there is also a requirement to offer religious education in all schools, and the national curriculum recognizes this.

British Jews are fairly comfortable with the presupposition that Britain is a Christian country. They tend to seek concessions rather than rights, the opportunity to withdraw rather than to be included, etc. However, as the Church of England loses its hegemony on the flow of British, or at least English life, it is harder for Jews to feel distinctively Jewish without doing something about it for themselves.

British Jewry amazed itself — it certainly startled the rest of the Jewish

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world — by taking decisive steps to respond to the issues of Jewish “continuity”. The community’s weakness is also its strength; it is an intensely organized and *respectful* society. Even Jewish radicals tend to play the game with the Establishment, and as a result, the latter has more clout than it may have elsewhere. While other communities may find it difficult to identify “the leader of the community”, British Jews are fairly ready to accept the Chief Rabbi in that role. This includes the Progressive Jews as well; though they do not accept his authority, they nevertheless accept him as the spokesperson for the Jewish community as long as he does not directly offend their denominational sensitivities.

TRADITION AND CHANGE

At the beginning of the 90s, with a newly installed Chief Rabbi explicitly espousing the principle of “inclusivism” — not quite everything that “pluralists” would want but a long way toward a respectful dialogue and possibilities of cooperation — the stage was set for more dramatic development in the fields of Jewish education and community enhancement than had hitherto been possible, given the tendency to avoid cooperation, or even dialogue, in areas that might be controversial in nature. The British hate a public row!

During 1993, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks managed to move several leading players and power brokers in the community to back a new initiative, and in September of that year launched an organization called “Jewish Continuity”; it got underway with my appointment as Chief Executive in January 1994. Rabbi Sacks was insistent that the organization have separate offices and be led by fresh faces. Its mandate was to be big and bold, and shift the community’s agenda toward issues of education and community development that were deemed to have an impact on the prospects of Jewish continuity. The Chief Rabbi’s original consultancy group, the “sounding board” that met through 1993, identified several areas of activity, all of which were considered necessary to addressing the multi-layered and complex issues that contribute to moving Jews toward greater commitment. These included: developing professional educators, communal frameworks, lay leadership, research, work with children in non-Jewish schools, religious outreach, and cross community events.

With a dynamic high profile and an impressive advertising campaign, Jewish Continuity captured the imagination of the organized Jewish community. Until then, each organization in the community had raised funds for itself. Now, a small handful of generous philanthropists provided a base fund for Jewish Continuity of nearly one million pounds sterling per year

for the first four years. In British Jewish community terms, this immediately established Jewish Continuity as a "larger" charity and signalled that it would become larger still, in view of the fact that it had not yet started to approach the general community for funds.

About 40 percent of this money was immediately set aside for funding purposes. The process of inviting groups, organizations and individuals to bid for funds created a remarkable new dynamic in only a few months. Throughout the country, many who had not previously examined whether their activities were likely to enhance the prospects of Jewish continuity, found themselves forced to do so, if for no other reason than to try to secure a grant for a program they wanted to operate. We were able to intervene in the agendas of over a hundred communal organizations and question their assumptions. While some saw this as a "reactive" process — merely responding to the ideas of others — more far-sighted leaders recognized this as the first shot in a "proactive" process — activating the community to think along new lines. It was called upon to adjust activities to meet the current attitudes of contemporary Jews, as well as the more subtle and insidious challenges Jews were now facing in a less overtly threatening world. Put simply, creating programs was ultimately not as important as prodding the hearts and minds of organizations to grapple with the issues we were raising.

Among such issues was the need to note that strategies for survival in an antipathetic world, which had stood us in good stead for centuries, were useless and even counterproductive for modern British Jews. Furthermore, the tendency "to belong" was giving way to the value of choice, and the value of commitment was yielding to the trend toward consumption. These general trends in society were eroding Jewish participation at an alarming rate. Added to the general decline in religious interest, the poor standard of Jewish education, the tendency to carry around an adolescent or even childish understanding of Jewish thinking, in contrast to very sophisticated levels of Western humanistic and technological/scientific education — the cocktail was close to lethal. It was also becoming increasingly obvious that Jewish commitment at one stage of life did not necessarily determine one's level of Jewish involvement at the next stage. *

THE NEW JOINT ISRAEL APPEAL

Within months, the previously single-issue Joint Israel Appeal (JIA) had offered to become our fund-raisers in a two line campaign for "Israel and Jewish Continuity", a formula previously unimaginable in a community where each organization does its own fund-raising, and concepts like "community chests" or "federated campaigns" are treated with deep suspicion.

This arrangement squared a circle which had the danger of becoming a damaging distraction. What with Yossi Beilin's pronouncements about Israel's lesser need for contributions, and Avrum Burg's manifesto for the Diaspora to re-direct its funds to local Jewish education, the debate intensified as to how much Jews should give to Israel as opposed to the maintenance of their home community. So long as this was seen as an "either/or" argument, both sides were bound to lose. However, the new set-up became a "both/and" situation, each side arguing that both targets were necessary, while at the same time revitalizing what had become a tired campaign with a new approach that made the main Israel campaigners appear both far-sighted and radical. However, such rapid expansion of an organization leads to its own pressures. A huge number of activists, the campaigners, had suddenly been coopted to our ranks and were expected to go out and raise money for this new venture.

Campaigning loves simple messages. Furthermore, it is always easier to be vague if you are campaigning for something at some distance from the donor, like Israel or Russian Jewry. S/he is less likely to say, "It's not like that on my street!" Striving to build up "British Jewry into a community of proud, knowledgeable, and committed Jews" (our mission) is not easy and the methods for doing so cannot be simplistically summarized. As a result, the JIA campaigners have faced more difficulties than they had initially anticipated. The general consensus that Jewish continuity must be assured breaks down when one tries to determine what kind of continuity — or indeed what constitutes "Jewish".

It has taken over a year to overcome some of those difficulties. Repeated misunderstandings as to purpose and focus have had to be ironed out by careful and patient discussion. A simple example is the widely acknowledged saying that "Israel is central to Jewish identity". But Jewish Continuity also wants to say that "Torah is central to Jewish identity"; this too ought to be an uncontroversial statement. Indeed, one of the things that Jewish Continuity has to achieve is a shift in popular Jewish attitudes on this issue. While few ask what exactly is meant by "Israel", many are fearful of the word "Torah". Are we talking about religion, Orthodoxy, Reform, cultural association? People have asked, "Why mention the word at all?" We have had to clarify and simplify what we are trying to do in order to give campaigners a fighting chance of selling the story on the doorstep of each home. We have had to learn to recognize the complexity of our task in the face of a market reality that the "product" has to be "sold". In the meantime, there appears to be agreement that Jewish Continuity has rightly identified its four strategic pillars of activity — personnel training, community development, individual growth, and the "Israel Experience".

The last topic is a good example of how it is easy to satisfy people at

one level while not really delivering the goods at another. This year, we have increased the numbers of young people going on a short-term or year-long program to Israel by a staggering 40 percent. Furthermore, we have increased the degree of preparation that young people undergo before they leave, and intend to improve the follow-up when they return. Here is a program that is easy to quantify and photograph — an ideal fundraising design. However, the long-term effects of such a focus are more problematic: The “quick fix” proposals of some leaders may be accepted at the cost of more serious programming and follow-through. On the other hand, the slow consensual course of community development, or the long-term, expensive, and professional task of personnel training are far less “sexy” and more arduous to project.

By the end of 1994, a specific list of goals and targets for 1995 was published — an act of precise intention probably unparalleled by any other Jewish organization in the country. Professor Bernard Riesman of Brandeis University believes this to be one of the boldest activities undertaken by Jews in the United Kingdom. Naming specific targets and quantifying them (e.g. “to train 35 teachers in five schools”) was a sign of our seriousness, but was also intended to be a signal for focused and high quality debate. If people knew precisely what we wanted to do, they could join in intelligent discussion and contribute to our growing understanding of what might or might not work in the field of enhancing the prospects of Jewish continuity.

Regrettably, this has not happened. There hardly has been any pointed discussion on our stated intentions. Some have generally applauded the initiative, others have criticized it, saying they have no idea what we are about; but hardly anyone has reacted to the document itself. Clearly this is our fault. Publishing a document is not the same as ensuring that people read or understand it, and we will need to work harder at getting them to relate to the material.

MODEST BUT NOTABLE RESULTS

Nonetheless, by mid-1995, less than two years after the inception of the Jewish Continuity organization, we can note several achievements. Jewish Continuity is perceived as a major player on the Jewish communal stage. The more this happens, Jews will expect the organization to be the main address for many Jewish interests, including helping institutions to overcome budgetary difficulties. Our intention has been to work as a lever, a catalytic agency, but the bigger we become, the more difficult it is to maintain the modest position. Despite these pressures, we have remained true to the original mandate set by the Chief Rabbi. Jewish Continuity has:

- established a teacher training unit in consultation with the Melton Center at the Hebrew University, with integral research programs at the University of London; and is training teachers in Jewish schools across the country as well as helping several institutions to revise their curricula designs;

- brought together *all* the youth organizations and movements, and created a Youth Service Development Unit to support career level training for youth and community workers as well as curricula and resource development;

- devised a system for regionalizing the process of community development that has won the enthusiastic endorsement of international experts;

- drafted a system for the training of lay leaders in organizations and of those wishing to assume such roles;

- published a children's *Siddur* which is state-of-the-art and has been snapped up in thousands of copies;

- increased by 40 percent the number of young people going on Israel trips this year, and improved their level of preparation;

- funded about a hundred new programs and projects;

- tripled the number of Jewish community workers in the country;

- drawn the various Jewish arts organizations in Britain together into consortia arrangements not previously possible;

- changed the focus of the Jewish student organization in the UK from political to primarily educational.

All this has been achieved by eight colleagues, our current total staff, who are not only highly motivated but represent the best that the professional Jewish communal service has to offer.

These are very early days for us. There are many who would want things to have been sorted and settled last year. There are others who would have preferred us to do nothing until we had thought through all the options and come up with the right answers. There are no right answers! For once, the rather haphazard British model of townplanning is relevant. You cannot dream up an ideal Jewish model and reproduce it while building grids and knocking things down in your path. One needs to recognize some of the fixed points, build round them, incorporate them into your program, and grow incrementally — learning as we go. This may be inefficient, but it has the greatest chance of success. □