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The Revival of British Jewry

Prof. Leslie Wagner, January 26, 2017

Filed Under: [World Jewry](#)



It is unusual to find the words “revival” and “British Jewry” in the same sentence. Several decades ago, the title of this paper would have come as a surprise to the many critics of British Jewry. For example, in 1989, Professor Daniel Elazar observed that “the powers that be in British Jewry are content with the status quo and do not seek change.” Author Steven Brook (1990) scathingly remarked that the leadership of British Jewry “revels in its mediocrity, shallowness and philistinism.” And, in 1996, in the conclusion of his study, entitled *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews of Europe Since 1945*, Professor Bernard Wasserstein stated that the Jews of Britain are “slowly but surely ... fading away. Soon nothing will be left but a disembodied memory.”

The current claim that a revival of British Jewry has taken place is supported mainly by the excellent work of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) in London. The JPR has carried out an important analysis of the UK national census data of 2011 and supplemented it with its own more recent community studies, in particular, its 2013 National Jewish Community Survey (NJCS) and its 2016 Jewish Schools report. To be sure, as with all sociological studies, particularly concerning Jews, there are less encouraging data that emphasize the challenges, failures and threats that confront the British Jewish community.

This essay, however, argues that the vibrancy of a community should not be judged by the threats that it faces. While threats and danger form an existential part of Jewish life, they do not necessarily determine the strength or weakness of a particular community. It is important that a community understands the nature of such threats and can organize to overcome them successfully. In doing so, the Jewish community in the U.K. provides evidence that it is vibrant and undergoing a revival. This study focuses on four aspects that show the revival of British Jewish life: demography; religious identity; educational and cultural activity; and confronting antisemitism.

Demography

The number of Jews in Britain depends upon whom one counts as a Jew. The UK national census avoids this problem by asking people to define themselves. On this basis, there were some 280,000 people who identified themselves as Jews in Britain in 2011, less than 0.5 percent of the total population, a minor *increase* from the 2001 census. The question of religious identification was voluntary and the census organization estimated that around seven percent of the total population did not answer it. If Jews follow the same pattern, the number of Jews would increase to around 300,000, an increase from the 2001 adjusted figure. In any case, the number of Jews is not more than 300,000. That being said, the decline which had taken place since the mid-1950s seems to have stopped, although the rate of that decline remains a matter of dispute. In the 1950s, the figure commonly given was 450,000, based on an estimate by Hannah Neustatter in 1955. However, critics have pointed out that Neustatter’s calculations were highly problematic and implied an increase of 150,000 over the generally accepted prewar figure of 300,000. Even considering the number of Jews arriving from Europe over this period, it is difficult to account for all the additional Jews. Others (Rubenstein, Jolles, and Rubenstein, 2011) have suggested that 390,000 is a much more plausible figure for the number of British Jews in the 1950s.

The differences noted above do not represent an arcane statistical dispute but affect our understanding of what has been happening to the community over the past half century or more. For example, in the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Haberman and Schmool (1995) recorded an estimate of 308,000 Jews in Britain during the mid-1980s. Using Neustatter’s baseline figure of 450,000, the previous number implies a drastic decline of over 30 percent between the 1950s and 1980s. If the 390,000 baseline figure is used instead, the decline is just over 20 percent. While it is a serious issue, it is less drastic. If one uses the mid-1980s estimate of 308,000 as a new base line, it indicates a further decline of more than ten percent in the fifteen years before the 2001 census. The 2011 census clearly shows that the figure has stabilized in the first decade of the Twenty-First Century and, in fact, there has been an increase of about four percent. The figures appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Changes in Numbers 1955-2011

Mid 1950s	390,000	
Mid 1980s	308,000	-21%
2001 Census	270,000	-12%
2011 Census	280,000	+4%

Jewish population figures are affected not only by birth and death rates but also by net migration into the community. There is qualitative evidence of a net migration of Jews from elsewhere in Europe (particularly France) to Britain in recent years, but no solid figures have been published. However, the census includes data on the number of Israelis in Britain. While some 35,000 Jews from Britain have made *aliyah* (immigrated to Israel) since 1948, a significant number of Israelis have moved to Britain. In a fascinating 2015 report, David Graham of the JPR [Institute for Jewish Policy Research] points out that between the two census dates of 2001 and 2011, for every two British subjects who have immigrated to Israel, three Israelis have relocated to Britain. In other words, in recent years any reduction in the number of British Jews through *aliyah* has been more than offset by the number of Israelis moving to the U.K. The difference over these ten years was 2470. According to Graham, "it is not too far-fetched to conclude that among other factors, Israel's net migration may have contributed to the Jewish demographic stability experienced in Britain over this period" (Graham, 2015). The largest factor by far, however, is the growing birth rate within the Strictly Orthodox¹ community as documented in a recent study by Staesky and Boyd (2015). They estimate that if current birth rates continue, half of all Jewish children born in the UK in 2031 will be to Strictly Orthodox families.

Taking all these factors into account, the JPR survey estimates that the mainstream community, excluding the Strictly Orthodox, declined by only 2.8 percent during the decade between the two census periods. This shows a much lower rate of decline than in the past. During the same period, overall community numbers rose by some four percent, showing the impact of the high birth rates in the Strictly Orthodox community. Some 65 percent of the community live in London and an additional ten percent or so in Manchester. Therefore, some 25 percent of British Jews live outside these two major centers. The viability of many of these communities must be carefully assessed and dealt with. The Strictly Orthodox community has become a much higher proportion of the Manchester community and it has increased dramatically in Gateshead, the location of a famous yeshiva. In both Manchester and Gateshead it is easier to maintain this way of life and housing is much cheaper than in London. Within London, Jews have moved to more densely Jewish populated areas such as Finchley, Hendon and Edgware and farther out to Hertfordshire as well.

Religious identification

The decline in formal religious identification through synagogue membership has been well documented. The sharpest decline, however, took place in the later decades of the Twentieth Century, at the time when the critics mentioned above were most pessimistic about the future of British Jewry. In the first decade of the Twenty-First Century, synagogue membership fell by around five percent. Not only was this decline smaller than in previous decades, but between 2005 and 2010, membership fell by just one percent. It seems that synagogue membership has stabilized for the present. However, this small overall decline masks the shifts between the different denominations. Membership of the Central Orthodox² group, mainly the United Synagogue, declined by ten percent over the decade, but, at 55 percent, this group still constituted the majority of synagogue members. Membership of the non-Orthodox communities also declined by around six percent over the decade, with a decline in the membership of the Reform and Liberal³ congregations not fully offset by the dramatic increase in membership in the *Masorti*⁴ congregations which took place from a much smaller base line. In 2010, non-Orthodox congregations accounted for 31 percent of total synagogue membership. The Sephardim remained stable at 3.5 percent, while the Strictly Orthodox reached nearly 11 percent, reflecting an increase of some 36 percent over 2000 (Graham and Vulkan, 2010). The figures are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Synagogue Membership

	Change 2001-2011 %	Share of Total 2011 %
Central Orthodox	-10	55
Non Orthodox	-6	31
Sephardim	0	3.5
Strictly Orthodox	+36	11

In so far as it is possible to identify the shifts between the different denominations over this period, it seems that the Central Orthodox synagogues lost members to non-Orthodox synagogues with a smaller shift to Strictly Orthodox, while non-Orthodox synagogues lost members who increasingly identified themselves as secular.

The comprehensive survey of British Jews (Graham, Staetsky and Boyd, 2013) published by the JPR concentrates more on self-identification and observance than on membership. This provides some interesting and detailed information and gives a picture of the community in 2013, but it cannot easily be applied to previous periods. It is a snapshot rather than an

indicator of trends. About a quarter of respondents identified themselves as secular or cultural Jews. This is consistent with the 2010 synagogue membership survey which showed that just under 25 percent of households did not belong to a synagogue. It is also reflected in the latest survey of Jewish observance in which 24 percent stated that they never attend synagogue or fast on Yom Kippur and 27 percent buy non-kosher meat and pork products for home consumption. However, it appears that a significant number of secular Jews attend a Passover Seder, although it may be a cultural or family occasion rather than a religious ceremony.

The 2013 report identified differences in religious observance according to age group. It is noteworthy that the younger age group respondents were more observant than the older group. For example, whereas 28 percent of those under 40 do not travel on Shabbat, the figure for those between 40 and 64 is 18 percent, and for those over 65, ten percent. There are similar results for turning on lights on Shabbat, with a factor of around three to one between the youngest and oldest age groups as far as Shabbat observance is concerned. The result is in the same direction regarding the observance of *kashrut* both inside and outside the home. The figures are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Religious Behaviour by Age Group

	Under 40 %	40-65 %	Over 65 %
Never travels on Shabbat	28	18	10
Does not turn on lights on Shabbat	26	17	8
Kosher meat only at home	54	47	43
Only kosher meat outside	42	34	25

This finding is confirmed in a survey of its members carried out by the United Synagogue out as part of its strategic review in 2014 (Meyer, 2015). As might be expected, United Synagogue members generally are more observant than the community average and younger members are more observant than older ones. In this survey, younger members are identified as below age 44 and older members as age 45 and older. The differences in percentages between the two groups regarding Shabbat observance are 36 to 20 and for eating only kosher meat outside the home, 74 to 60. According to seasoned observers, perhaps the sampling methodology in the JPR survey may have resulted in higher than average responses from the more observant within the younger age group, but the differences (for example, three to one regarding Shabbat observance) seem to be too great to be accounted for by any methodological bias. There are a complex set of reasons for this development. It is partly demographic since Orthodox and Strictly Orthodox families have more children. Therefore, over time a greater proportion of younger people come from observant families. Others argue that it is partly the result of the increased enrollment in Jewish schools in the past two decades. However, there is no clear evidence regarding the effect of Jewish schooling on future Jewish observance. We must also take into account the increasing number of gap year students attending yeshivas or seminary studies in Israel before returning to the UK and the impact of outreach programs to young adults and others.

An additional development as far as religion is concerned is the presence of more experimental and informal approaches to organized prayer, such as partnership *minyanim* and egalitarian services and ideas such as Open Orthodoxy.⁵ Established organizations try to accommodate such changes sometimes without success. On the whole, it is clear that there is greater dynamism regarding issues of observance, particularly relating to prayer.

Finally, the subject of intermarriage is part of religious identification. Two decades ago intermarriage was perceived as the greatest danger to Jewish religious and cultural survival. At the time, the new Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks asked, "Will we have Jewish grandchildren?" A JPR report written by David Graham in 2016 and based on an analysis of the census and the 2013 NJCS confirms that the concerns about the effects of intermarriage were well founded. The commitment of intermarried couples to Jewish observance and Jewish values was substantially below that of Jewish married couples. For example, while 76 percent of Jewish married couples observe some aspects of Shabbat, only 29 percent of intermarried couples do so. The differences regarding buying kosher meat for the home are even sharper – 67 percent of in-married couples and only three percent of intermarried couples. There are fewer differences between the two groups regarding commitment to social justice, supporting Jewish cultural events and remembering the Holocaust. These are the Jewish values which intermarried couples most identify with. In conclusion, Graham reports that the percentage of intermarriage seems to have levelled off in the last two decades. It jumped from 11 percent in the second half of the 1960s to 23 percent in the 1980s, reaching 25 percent at the end of the Twentieth Century. It has stabilized around this figure during the first thirteen years of the Twenty-First Century.

Education and culture

The dramatic growth in the numbers attending Jewish schools over recent decades has been reported by The Commission on Jewish Schools (2008), Kahn-Harris and Gidley (2010) and Wagner (2011). More recently, Staetsky and Boyd (2016) have published a comprehensive review of this growth for the JPR. Their essential points are as follows:

- Since 1995, the number of Jewish children in Jewish schools has almost doubled, from 16,725 to 30,874
- The number of Jewish schools has more than doubled from 62 to 139.

- Most of the increase has occurred due to a rise in the Strictly Orthodox population where 100 percent of children attend Jewish schools.
- The number of Jewish pupils in other, *i.e.* non-Strictly Orthodox schools (classified as “mainstream”) has also increased by some 45 percent over the past twenty years, despite the fact that the number of mainstream, school-age children has declined over this period. An increasing number of mainstream Jewish parents are choosing Jewish schools for their children’s education.
- Overall, the percentage of Jewish children in Jewish schools has increased from 38 to 63 percent over the past twenty years. For the mainstream community the twenty-year change is from 30 to 50 percent

While the increasing demand for Strictly Orthodox schools can be predicted with reasonable accuracy due to the rising birth rates in that community, there are problems of supply and finance. Most Strictly Orthodox schools do not receive government funding because they wish to retain greater control of the curriculum, devote more time to *limmudei kodesh* [Jewish religious studies] and limit the number of secular subjects. However, it is noteworthy that there is a marked increase in enrollment in mainstream schools during a period of decline in population. Here, parents perceive themselves as having a choice of whether to send their child to a Jewish school. Some of the reasons for the increasing popularity of Jewish schools are as follows:

- the heightened awareness among parents of their own lack of Jewish knowledge and the threat of intermarriage as highlighted by former Chief Rabbi Sacks and reflected in the establishment of Jewish Continuity⁶ in 1993
- the growing concern among parents about falling standards of academic achievement and poor behavior in non-Jewish schools and their general cultural and ethnic environment, particularly at the secondary/high school level
- the publication of the Government reports on schools and the tables of academic performance which placed Jewish schools in the top bracket
- concerted efforts to increase the number of schools
- the demonstration effect or tipping point at which a significant number of Jewish children within any social or synagogue grouping are attending Jewish schools

To be sure, success is not without problems, namely that demand seemingly continues to outstrip supply. In the case of primary schools, this is largely a function of location. The increase in Jewish population in the most densely Jewish areas of London has brought about a demand for more Jewish schools within a limited radius. As far as secondary schools are concerned, there seem to be enough available places to meet the demand across London. Some ten years ago, parents in North West London were willing to send their children to King Solomon High School in Redbridge, a neighborhood with a declining Jewish population some ten miles away. At present, parents are not willing to do so for a variety of reasons. While some parents complain that there is no room for their child in a Jewish secondary school in the more densely Jewish populated areas of London, King Solomon has to accept non-Jewish pupils because there are not enough Jewish children to fill all its places. Furthermore, the increase in places and enrollment not only requires more buildings but also more teachers of *limmudei kodesh*, who are not easy to find. The community has established an organization called PAJES [Partnerships for Jewish Schools] in order to deal with these problems.

The general cultural scene, particularly for secular and less religious Jews, has been transformed over the last two decades with many remarkable initiatives and developments. *Limmud*, now an international franchise, began and continues to flourish in Britain. Thousands attend its end of year conference. Jewish Book Week has grown from a small group of lectures into a literary festival with events around Britain. Similarly, the Jewish Film Festival has expanded to meet a continuously growing demand, while JW3, the newly established community center, is a great attraction and a venue for events.

Of course, these activities are open to all Jews and are attended by religiously affiliated Jews as well. However, they are particularly attractive to those who are less religiously committed. In the past, such Jews felt marginalized by a community which largely defines itself in religious terms. Indeed, past reports and speeches have referred to “marginal Jews.” At present, there is a growing range of activities, events and organizations, including a new pluralist high school, JCOSS [Jewish Community Secondary School] that encourage the involvement of such Jews and make them feel part of the mainstream as well. Perhaps, such activities and organizations have contributed to slowing down the rate of decline in the numbers of the mainstream community that was indicated by the census. These activities provide a framework for the participation of secular and less observant and unaffiliated Jews who may not even have identified themselves as Jews in the 2001 census, but would do so today.

The changes over the past decade were anticipated in a research report published by Steven M. Cohen and Keith Kahn-Harris in 2004. Cohen and Kahn-Harris studied those who could be defined as “moderately-engaged,” *i.e.*, those whose commitment to Jewish life and Jewish communal involvement hung in the balance. They observed that many of these Jews were more positive about being Jewish than their public behavior might indicate and concluded as follows:

The challenge... is to engage with these findings and fashion policies and practices that will Jewishly engage the large segment of UK Jewry that is neither heavily involved in Jewish life, nor so far removed as to be beyond the reach of Jewish institutions, educators and communities. With appropriate reflection, deliberation and commitment, organized British Jewry can enhance its effectiveness in spurring Jewish interest and Jewish involvement.

(Cohen and Kahn-Harris, 2004)

Antisemitism

Unfortunately, this positive report about British Jewry must discuss antisemitism. The Community Security Trust (CST) publishes statistics of reported antisemitic incidents on a regular basis. Table 4 shows the number of incidents reported in recent years.

Table 4: Anti-Semitic Incidents Reported

Year	Number
2009	931
2010	646
2011	609
2012	650
2013	535
2014	1168
2015	924
2016 (to end June)	557

The figures show the impact of external events upon antisemitism in Britain. The number of incidents rose significantly during the conflicts between Israel and Gaza in 2009 and 2014. The figure for 2015, lower than 2014, reflects an increase in antisemitic incidents in the early months of that year following the murder of Jews in Paris and in Copenhagen. The CST also reported an increase in incidents during the three months before July 2016 when antisemitism in the Labour Party was in the news.

There is no doubt that in recent years there has been a rise in antisemitic activity and that British Jews feel more anxious than in the past. The fact that the situation is not as serious as in many parts of the rest of Europe is but a small consolation. The three sources of antisemitism in the UK are the extreme Right, radical Islam and the extreme Left. The latter has been of major concern because of the tolerance of antisemitic attitudes within the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. This antisemitism is both overt and is also thinly disguised as anti-Zionism. Interestingly, in its report of the 557 incidents documented in the first half of 2016, the CST identified 135 as having an overt political motivation. Of these, 98 were identified with the extreme Right; 32 were "anti-Zionist" and presumably from the extreme Left; and five were classified as Islamist. (CST, 2016)

Verbal or written insults accounted for around 75 percent of antisemitic incidents in 2015, the former usually took place on the street and the latter, on social media. There were 82 incidents of assault and four of extreme assault and 65 incidents of damage to Jewish owned property. According to a survey in the JPR by Staesky and Boyd (2014), respondents were more concerned about antisemitism in the media and online rather than in political statements conveyed through graffiti and vandalism of buildings. The CST reports make somber reading and explain the heightened fear and anxiety within the community. These are compounded by events on university campuses in which Jewish students are threatened and meetings about Israel are attacked.

While it is clear that British Jewry is facing increased antisemitism, as we have stated above, the vitality of the community should not be judged by the presence or absence of antisemitic threats, but by its awareness of and capacity to cope with such threats. The Community Security Trust, highly professional and well run, provides that capacity. It not only works to safeguard Jewish activities, but also has effective links with the police and other agencies responsible for public safety. While public abuse and assaults are difficult to prevent, it is noteworthy that no communal event fully secured by CST staff has been attacked with success.

Generally speaking, there are three groups of actors in a given society: 1) those with power; 2) those with influence and; 3) the general public. Those with power include government ministers, civil servants, members of parliament and political agencies. Those with influence are the media, intellectuals, academics and the cultural elite. The general population constitute the remainder. Those with power, the most important group, have expressed unequivocal opposition to antisemitism and have acted continuously to fight against Jew-hatred and to deal harshly with its perpetrators through legislation and other policies. The situation is different among those with influence where an anti-Israel perspective increasingly serves as a cover for the expression of antisemitism. This is a serious challenge as it puts the Jewish community under constant pressure and, at some point, it may influence those in power and public opinion. Generally, British Jewry has shown confidence in dealing with this issue, despite the occasionally strong criticism from those outside the UK, particularly in Israel. However, a terrorist attack, such as the shootings at the *Hyper Cacher* Supermarket in Paris in 2015, would test the resilience of British Jewry.

University campuses also represent a source of anxiety for the community and this problem requires a fuller study. Anti-Israel and, in some cases, antisemitic activities on campus are initiated almost exclusively by student and staff

organizations. They are politically and organizationally independent of their respective universities. Therefore, anti-Israel resolutions passed by these students and staff members do not commit the university. Thus far, no university in the UK has approved an academic boycott of Israel. Indeed, a formal agreement of scientific co-operation between the UK and Israel is in place and enjoys active and widespread support in British universities. There is no doubt, however, that activities such as "Israel Apartheid Week" and the vocal disruption of meetings have an important propaganda effect on students and make life difficult for many Jewish students. They have displayed courage and have won a number of victories. University authorities have tried to balance allowing free speech with a duty to ensure the safety of their students with mixed success. This ongoing problem is dealt with by Jewish students and community leaders.

The approach of the media and some Israeli leaders prevents a more coherent and united response by world Jewry to antisemitism. Occasionally, it seems that the Israeli response to the predicament of Diaspora Jewry is to encourage *aliyah* (immigration to Israel). While there are many good reasons for making *aliyah* from Britain, escaping the effects of terrorism and antisemitism should not be one of them. Israelis should be wary of offering unsolicited advice and be less critical of British Jewry as it struggles against antisemitism. Partnership is better than divisiveness in this area.

Conclusion

The story of British Jewry in the first fifteen years of the Twenty-First Century is one of revival rather than decline. Unlike earlier periods, numbers have stabilized rather than falling dramatically. This change is not entirely the result of the increase of births in the Strictly Orthodox community. Younger people are more religiously observant than their parents and are more likely to send their children to Jewish schools. There are more experimental frameworks for prayer and a more varied range of cultural activities attracts both affiliated and unaffiliated Jews. So far, antisemitism, albeit a problem that requires constant vigilance, has not become an existential threat. The survival of declining communities outside London and Manchester remains a challenge. It remains to be seen whether the censuses of 2021 and 2031 and future JPR studies confirm that the present revival of British Jewry is sustained in the coming decades.

Editor's Note: The text of this article is based on a paper which Professor Wagner read at the JCPA on 21 March 2016. It has since been updated. Because of the original format of a lecture the author's references to his sources are given by name in the text with full bibliographical information at the end of the paper.

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Notes

¹ "Strictly Orthodox" is the term for "Haredi" or "Ultra-Orthodox" used in Britain by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

² In Britain, the term "Central Orthodox" describes those congregations, usually belonging to the United Synagogue, whose prayer services and leadership are Modern Orthodox while many (though not all) of their members are not observant but attend services and affiliate with these synagogue. The conversions of the centralized *Beth Din* (religious court) are usually accepted by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel.

³ In Britain, Reform and Liberal resemble Reform synagogues in the United States. Reform, however, is more traditional in practice, whereas Liberal may be regarded as close to "Classical Reform" in the U.S.

⁴ *Masorti* in Britain is the equivalent of Conservative Judaism in the United States.

⁵ "Open Orthodoxy" is a movement founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss in New York in the 1990s. It advocates observance of Jewish law, intellectual openness, spirituality and a greater role for women. Most traditional Orthodox rabbis are opposed to it.

⁶ "Jewish Continuity" is an idea of former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks that became an organization in 1993 in order to raise funds and develop programs to foster that idea. It merged with the United Israel Appeal in 1997, which continues to put its ideas into practice.

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Prof. Leslie Wagner is a fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Before making Aliyah in 2008 he was Chancellor of the University of Derby and Vice-Chancellor (President) of Leeds Metropolitan University in England. Within the Jewish community the offices held by Professor Wagner included Vice President of the United Synagogue and trustee of the Office of the Chief Rabbi. He chaired the Commission on the Future of Jewish Schools for the Jewish Leadership Council. In 2000, Professor Wagner was honored by the Queen for his services to higher education and the Jewish community.

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