

JEWISH WOMEN IN BRITAIN

by *Marlena Schmool*

In giving an overview of Jewish women in Great Britain I intend to touch on three areas: Jewish organisations; participation in synagogue life; and the position of Jewish women's research in Britain. Naturally, what I have to say will scarcely skim the surface of each topic. The main sources for the data I quote are the regular compilations of synagogue membership and estimates of population which the

Board of Deputies Community Research Unit has conducted regularly the past thirty years; and two recent large scale-studies: *The Review of Women in the Jewish Community* in 1993 for the Chief Rabbi's Commission on Women; and *The Survey of Social Attitudes of British Jews* conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in 1995.



In common with other "western" communities, British Jewry is based on immigrants. Its modern history is usually dated from 1656 with the settlement in London of a small group of *sephardi* Jews from Holland who were quickly followed by co-religionists of *ashkenazi* stock coming either directly from Germany or via Holland.¹ The community continued to grow slowly and by 1800 was estimated at between 20,000 and 25,000.² By the early 1880s, with

an escalating influx from Eastern and Central Europe, British Jewry numbered a little over 60,000.³ Immigrant and native-born alike lived mainly in London, originally concentrating in the Spitalfields and Aldgate/Whitechapel areas at the eastern boundary of the City of London. Between 1880 and 1914 the immigrants and their first-generation British-born children led to a community numbering 300,000.⁴

Leaders of the established community responded to increased immigration by attempting "to turn the immigrants into Englishmen of the Jewish persuasion" and if this was not possible for the adults, then certainly it was to be attempted for the children.⁵ From the point of view of acculturated British Jewry, the acceptance they had laboured long to earn seemed threatened by newcomers with strange customs who did not readily blend into the late-Victorian English scene. They therefore tried to mould the immigrants to a pattern of private religion, maintained in the home not in the street, where attendance at synagogue on Saturday mirrored church attendance on Sunday. For immigrants who came from self-contained, often rural societies, the move to the smoky industrial tenements and overcrowded houses of East London and other urban centres must have been traumatic.⁶ This influx has provided the demographic core of British Jewry throughout the twentieth century. No later immigration has been large enough to greatly colour the broad trends of British Jewish development. Concomitantly the values and the patterns of Jewish identity that emanate from that immigration have formed the cornerstones of the modern British community.

¹ V.D. Lipman, *A Social History of the Jews in England, 1850-1950*, London, Watts and Co., 1954, p. 8.

² *ibid.*

³ V.D. Lipman, *A History of the Jews in Britain since 1858*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1990, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rosalyn Livshin, 'The Acculturation of the Children of Immigrant Jews in Manchester, 1890-1930,' in David Cesarani, (editor), *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, pp. 79-96.

⁶ See S. Waterman and M. Schmool, 'Literary Perspectives on Jews in the Early Twentieth Century' in Russell King, John Connell and Paul White, (editors), *Writing Across Worlds-Literature and Migration*, London, Routledge, 1995.

Between 1918 and 1950, British Jewry grew in numbers from some 300,000 to over 400,000. Since the mid-1950s there has been a steady contraction in core numbers caused by both strict demographic decrease and diffuse social movement away from the community.⁷ British Jewry in common with other western Jewish communities has had to face the paradox that acceptance by host communities has been at the cost of widespread rejection of Jewish religious and cultural values and of physical departure from the community.

Populations are not static; British Jewry is at present reaching the end of the demographic period rooted in the late 19th century. Later inflows of refugees in the 1930s and immediately after World War II, and between 1956 and the 1970s with incomers from Egypt, Hungary, Aden and Iraq, were not large enough to change the long-term demographic nature of community. However their synagogues and associations (and they as individuals) have become identifiable elements in the communal framework, as have Israelis and South Africans.

In 1995, the British Jewish core population was estimated at some 285,000 persons with just under two-thirds in the geographical boundaries of Greater London and the remainder in smaller regional communities.⁸ While there are strong, long-established communities throughout northern England, notably in Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool (and Glasgow), when seen with a broad brush the concentration of British Jewry within (Greater) London has always been its most marked geographic feature. Within this population as a whole, women account for approximately 55 percent.⁹ Outside London, the proportion of Jewish women rises to 57 percent because of the comparative longevity of women, internal migration patterns and the resulting age-structure of smaller communities.

The Jewish population of Great Britain is established by the death rates method that has been used since the early 1890s. Over the century, the method has been refined and the England and Wales death rates now used are age-, sex- and social-class-specific but a basic principle is maintained. Anyone who dies as a Jew or has her/his Jewishness recognised by using a Jewish burial authority is covered by this estimate.

This population does not confine itself to the synagogue-affiliated community because many non-members who seek (or whose relatives seek, or who leave instructions that they wish for) Jewish burial are included in this figure. The Jewish population is at present decreasing by about 2000 persons per year.

Most of the population decrease is a measured excess of deaths over births. The remaining decline is due mainly to social or communal erosion, that is to movement out of the community either through intermarriage/partnering, or through reduced communal interest, involvement or feeling. We have to recognise obviously that this is a cumulative effect.

In size, British Jewry as a whole falls somewhere between Philadelphia and Chicago. However it is different in nature being spread among 80 or so 'communities' over an area, north to south, from Aberdeen to Torquay (roughly the distance from New York to Chicago as the crow flies) and between the east and west coasts. It is, of course, unevenly spread. Within Britain as a whole, Jews account for one half of one per cent

⁷ S. Haberman and M. Schmool, 'Estimates of the British Jewish Population 1984-88' in *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A*, Vol. 158, Part 3, 1995, pp. 547-562.

⁸ Schmool and Cohen, op. cit. 1998.

⁹ Compared with 51 percent for the general population of England and Wales.

of the population but this varies from area to area. Greater London, where Jews make up some 2.5% of the population, and the adjacent areas have a total Jewish population of 196,000 – approximately two-thirds of the national total. Seven other towns have a Jewish population of more than 3,000, while the remaining numbers are found in some seventy locations with populations ranging from 20 to more than 1,000 people.

British Jewry follows a very British pattern: historically, community activities in urban centres have been centred around churches, workingmen's club' and trade unions. Therefore, Jewish community centres on the American model have not developed. The synagogue acts as the community centre. This has been a positive factor in that it has maintained religious cohesion. However, more recently, it has made more secularised Jews feel that there is little place for them in the community.

There are about 365 congregations in Britain (including *shtetls*) most of which are in Greater London, with one in six situated in the main Jewish concentration of North West London.¹⁰ Direct survey findings and indirect estimates indicate that around two-thirds of the population are linked to synagogue life, either through personal or family membership in an orthodox or progressive synagogue. In Britain, progressive synagogues include those belonging to the Assembly of Asarti Synagogues, the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, and the Union of Liberal and progressive Synagogues. This proportion has remained stable over thirty or so years. Most synagogues have religious schools that are attended by about one-fifth of the school-age group. A further 38% of children attend a Jewish Day School.

British Jewry has a panoply of women's organisations: British WIZO, Emunah (Mizrachi Women), League of Jewish Women, Women's Division of the UJIA, B'nai Brith Women's Lodges, many 'friends' groups, and synagogue 'ladies guilds' which are slowly metamorphosing into a gender-free 'guild'. The four first major, organisations have a combined, overlapping membership of approximately 22,500. The Women's Review and the JPR study show a pattern of double-membership where those over 55 belong to a Zionist group (such as WIZO) and a service organisation (such as B'nai Brith, League of Jewish Women or Ladies' Guild). In contrast, younger women tend to be involved with those organisations which lean towards self-development and adult education (such as Yakar, Spiro).

To generalise very broadly, older women participate more actively in Jewish community life while younger ones appear more passive. This may of course be a life cycle effect and it is somewhat mitigated by participation in fund-raising groups (e.g. with Jewish Care, New Israel Fund) which especially target younger people – although such groups are not single-sex groups and, to the best of my knowledge their membership has not been examined in any detail. Over the past 15 to 20 years women's organisations have been aware of (and are now ready to admit) problems in recruiting younger women, partly because young Jewish women are working more outside the home. One outcome has been that they now welcome husbands/partners to regular, educational type meetings not just to the fundraising events which were directed at couples.

Britain is blessed with a Sex Discrimination Act and an Equal Pay Act that came into force in 1975. The SDA specifically prohibits discrimination in employment, education and advertising and in provision of facilities such as housing. It is unlawful to discriminate because someone is married. Of course, like all such

¹⁰ See "A Profile of British Jewry" by Marlena Schmool and Frances Cohen (1998) p. 21.

Acts it is not perfectly adhered to but it has obviously affected women's position in the general, and by implication the Jewish community. At base it means that a prospective employer cannot ask, as I was once asked, "Mrs Schmool, you're a young married woman, how much longer do you intend to go on working?"

Now a word about women's contribution to those community organisations that have historically been male strongholds. This is an important indicator of the acceptance and integration of women into mainstream leadership roles. Clearly, any contribution to such organisations depends on the quality of the persons involved – not just the numbers – but as a starting point and lacking survey material on quality of input, I want to say a word about women's representation in these bodies.

In 1994, I reviewed female membership in central institutions, namely the Board of Deputies, Regional Representative Councils and Central Progressive Synagogue Councils (the Orthodox, except for the *Sephardim*, did not then have women on their central councils). The overall finding was that, for the eleven organisations examined, women made up 25% of the members and 20% of committee members. I have partly updated the figures for this seminar but could not cover all the organisations in the time I had. However, I did find that, in the three main synagogue councils' of management, women now account for 22% of the membership. Moreover, the council of the orthodox London-centred United Synagogue is now included as women were 'admitted' in late 1994. Now, 21%, there are women; although of course there are no women honorary officers.

Since 1994 most main organisations have been through management and other structural reviews. Committees have disappeared and councils have been streamlined, so when we look back we are not always comparing like with like. Nevertheless the trends can be informative.

As a short case study, I have brought together data from the Board of Deputies' records, where currently 24% of the total membership are women. The Board is secular, non-denominational and a prototypical "men's organisation." Members (Deputies) are mainly representatives of synagogues although there are also organisational members. All the historic barriers to female (and for that matter younger) memberships have been there: certain constituencies only permit election of men; meetings are wrongly timed/placed; plenary sessions are long-winded, talk-shops.

These well-aired problems were confronted in the recent management review. The Board was reconstituted last June and while the proportion of women was unchanged, the leaner Executive Committee and new Divisional Boards (top elected positions of the Board) now have almost equal proportions of men and women (47% women) and 2 out of 5 Honorary Officers are women. The proportion of committee places taken by women has risen steadily ñ although the female proportion of the Board as a whole seems to be plateauing out.

Another example of women's rising profile is the increased number of women working as leading professionals rather than secretaries. We have women executive directors of charities (*Sha'are Sedek*, *Chai* lifeline) welfare organisations, (Ravenswood, Leeds, Manchester), synagogue and central organisations (ULPS, BoD). A very particular example of feminisation is the Progressive rabbinate. The first British woman rabbi was appointed to a congregation in 1977. Currently one in five of all Progressive rabbis are women, as are one in four of those serving in Progressive congregations. This reflects the interest British Jewish women are showing in Jewish learning. The expansion is shown also in numbers of women in the

two mainstream institutions of higher Jewish learning in Britain. The two colleges concerned are: (orthodox) Jews College and (progressive) Leo Baeck. At Jews College, excluding *semicha* candidates, 45% (32/71) of students are women while at Leo Baeck, women are 65% (22/34) of non-rabbinical and nine out of sixteen rabbinical students. It is unfortunate that, while clearly this is a growing phenomenon in Britain, we do not yet have counterbalancing numbers of orthodox young women who are going to 'sem'.

As I mentioned earlier, the synagogue is the central British Jewish institution. Seventy per cent of the core community are associated with a synagogue. Of these approximately 93,000 households, 90% have a female membership component while only 87% include a male. This is because 13% of memberships are women on their own, for the most part widows whose membership has been inherited from their husband, compared with 8% of memberships who are single men.

Personal attitudes and 'opportunity costs' clearly affect who participates in synagogue life and how often. Attitudes are formed by experience and life-cycle position and opportunity is bounded by available time and local provision. So how much 'spare' time do women have? In 1992-3, a British woman in full-time employment had 3.3 hours of free time per week-day and 8.3 free hours per week-end day (Social Trends). But with the competing demands of modern life, a person needs strong motivation to be involved in synagogue activities. And I must stress here that I am not talking about attendance at service, rather about the social/communal activities which proliferate around the synagogue.

Twenty per cent of women synagogue members say they attend most *Shabbatot* or more often, 19% attend about once a month and 6% never attend. Most of the core community lives within easy distance from a synagogue – if they are not totally reliant on public transport. In *The Women's Review*, only 17% described themselves as taking part in synagogue activities and this minority stand out from the others as regards their participation in the community generally: [although one in five of these synagogue activists did not belong to any other communal organisation], 29% named three or more other communal organisations with which they had a connection in the twelve months prior to the study in 1993. They are the backbone of communal life.

As might be anticipated, level of synagogue involvement varied with degree of religious commitment: 2% of those who call themselves Secular compared with 32% of strictly Orthodox say they are active in the synagogue. The larger, intermediate, categories – Jewish/Progressive, and traditional – show broadly similar levels of interest with 15% and 19% of each group being active. The activity level of members of different synagogue 'denominations', shows that members of Orthodox and Progressive synagogues are likely to be 46% and 45% active respectively.

The Women's Review was largely prompted by the realisation that many mainstream orthodox women were dissatisfied with their role in synagogue and the way they were treated in the synagogue – which will of course affect involvement. Both *The Women's Review* and the JPR picked up on this issue. *The Review* probed a range of attitudes including seating arrangements in synagogue buildings, women's prayer groups, and the need for special women's blessings.

I have chosen to consider one particular statement included in both the studies. Respondents were asked to say whether they agreed/disagreed (on a five point scale) that "the people who run synagogues sometimes make others feel like outsiders." JPR analysis showed no difference between the levels of agreement of men

and women – 66% of synagogue-affiliated men and 62% of women, (14% strongly) agree with the statement. The earlier *Women's Review* found that 65% of women synagogue members agreed with the sentiment. This concurrence of men and women leads me to ask whether they would also agree on another finding that comes to light in unpacking the *Review* data: 55% of the *Review* sample had found a synagogue that 'met their needs as a woman' while the remaining 45% had not.

When we compared how these two groups felt about the 'outsiders' statement, we found that 76% of those who had not found a synagogue to meet their needs agreed with the sentiment and even 61% of those who had found a 'suitable' synagogue agreed. These are high levels of agreement about a negative aspect of synagogue atmosphere which may constitute a warning for the future. I would suggest that it is communally unhealthy for 3 out of 5 women, who seem otherwise in tune with their synagogue, to feel there is this element of exclusion. Will women, and by extension men, really continue to go where they do not feel welcome?

In appraising the bibliography of British research on Jewish women I was disappointed to see that there were at most 20 studies. There are, of course, many Jewish women in British cultural life who are not identified with the Jewish community. As a matter of course in my work, I attempt to keep in touch with the activities of various women's initiatives like the Jewish Women's Network, the Board's Women's Issues Action Group and The Half-Empty Bookcase (an annual gathering on Jewish women's literature), and the Stanmore (Orthodox) Women's *Tefillah* Group [5 years old in February 1998], but I felt that a few extra telephone calls might bring new information.

While we can justifiably boast that *The Women's Review* was, in 1993, the most far-reaching Jewish social survey ever undertaken in Britain, it is disheartening to know that there has been no consequent burgeoning of primary research. Indeed, the first footnote references in the latest British women's Jewish book, *Under my Hat* by Sally Berkovic are all for American studies and there are overall only comparatively few British sources quoted.

This certainly does not mean *The Review* database has been exploited to the full; and it is encouraging to be able regularly to provide new tabulations to students and communal workers. It is also naturally very challenging to see how far data can be analysed to throw light on communal trends, especially as we now have comparative material from the JPR study (which goes some way to meet the plea we made on publication of the Women's Report for 'similar data about men'). Nevertheless, *The Women's Review* has not really given a strong push to Jewish women's studies in Britain.

I feel that this lack of follow-up in part manifests a widespread discontent with the outcomes of *The Review* process. And I would like to close with a few observations about the expectations raised by this research and how far they remain unrealised.

The Chief Rabbi's Commission on Women in the Community was loudly heralded when it appeared in 1993. It attempted to reach affiliated and unaffiliated women, and spread its net as widely as it could. It involved many individuals nationally working in task forces on issues such as family life and Jewish education. The preliminary qualitative research, from written evidence and focus groups, showed that, in launching this initiative, the Chief Rabbi had accurately touched a nerve in the community. Women were looking for change. With hope heightened in this way someone was bound to be left disappointed. And, unfortunately, I would say the main impression left with women is a sense of non-fulfilment, a lack of solutions.

Sadly, the research gave point to efforts (already embryonic when the study was carried out) on behalf of abused Jewish women and children which has resulted in the first helpline and a mother/child refuge. This effort has reached many otherwise 'unattached' women both as clients and, more happily, as supporters.

In the course of community development work, new formats for Bat Mitzvah are being tried: my own synagogue no longer has groups of girls being 'confirmed' on Sunday mornings but rather has a *Shabbat* morning ceremony for an individual (albeit after the main service) where the rabbi addresses the *bat mitzvah* on her own, directly after the reading of the Torah as he would a *bar mitzvah*. Other synagogues allow girls to choose the way in which they celebrate this *rite de passage*.

On a more public front, there has been an art exhibition at a major London art gallery, the Barbican, called "Rubies and Rebels: Jewish Female Identity in Contemporary British Art." It was accompanied by a catalogue. However, women still ask what *The Review* achieved. The main source of unhappiness and sense of non-achievement, beside which everything else pales, has been lack of imaginative responses to the seemingly intractable problems of *get* and *agunah*. Responses have been slow. The much publicised Pre-Nuptial Agreement (seen as a way of pre-empting possible problems with *get*) has not been greatly advertised nor much taken up by couples about to marry. With the right/left religious divide deepening, we seem likely to have more, rather than less, stringent approaches to and interpretations of the problems women face here.