

## BOOKS

A study of contemporary British Jewry finds it in a healthier state than some other commentators have diagnosed

# Happy the way we are

## TURBULENT TIMES

By Keith Kahn-Harris and Ben Gidley  
*Continuum*, £19.99

REVIEWED BY MIRI FREUD-KANDEL

**T**HE CURRENT proliferation of studies of British Jews, whether chief rabbis, institutions or laity, is remarkable. The authors of this latest work would probably argue that this reflects the increasing vitality of Anglo-Jewry. For theirs is a broadly positive account of the state of contemporary Jewish life in Britain. Indeed, the book claims that a study of the current British Jewish community is instructive in relation to minority groups in general in modern Britain.

Kahn-Harris and Gidley describe the efforts made over the past two decades to identify a distinctive Anglo-Jewish voice. In an earlier, monocultural Britain, Jews tended to downplay Jewish differences. But, while British multiculturalism—particularly post-7/7—has come under attack, its influence has slowly enabled Jews in Britain to reflect on how Jewish identity is to be maintained now that British identity is secure.

All too often, the Jewish community's experiences of adapting to British society have been ignored by those seeking models of multiculturalism. It has been perceived as too successful in acculturating to be relevant. Yet it was this apparent success that led Jonathan Sacks famously to ask: "Will we have Jewish grandchildren?" The very security of Anglo-Jewry had bred insecurity about the Jewish future!

*Turbulent Times* shows how, in addressing this issue, Jewish institutions and individuals have used this insecurity to



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Milking it: dancers celebrate Jewish identity by evoking the spirit of Tevye at the 2007 Simchah in the Square

renew Anglo-Jewry in ways that could never have been imagined when successive critical reports on the state of different sectors of the community were produced in the 1990s. Notably, these renewal processes have occurred largely despite the maintenance of outdated, overly bureaucratic institutions.

Identifying Anglo-Jewry's tendency to look inwards, rendering it slow to identify shifts both in wider British society and world Jewry, Kahn-Harris and Gidley draw parallels with currents beyond British shores. There is a critical, reflective study, generally con-

scious of its limitations. One of the latter is its focus on institutions and their leaders rather than ordinary Jews, reflecting an Anglo-Jewish instinct to prioritise hierarchy.

The book portrays British Jews' recent willingness to vocalise criticism of Israel as a departure from the norm, failing to note how, as Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits repeatedly questioned the morality of Israeli policy. In their conclusions, the authors note that long-term renewal requires substance—something that many British Jews do not find in theological principles.

In asking whether the desire to maintain Jewish identity for identity's sake is sufficient, Kahn-Harris and Gidley miss an opportunity to address bigger issues. Nonetheless, their argument that continuing dialogue across the varied Jewish communities in Britain can provide the basis for future creativity seems a salient note on which to end their analysis.

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