

A POLYPHONY OF CONTENDING VOICES

TURBULENT TIMES: THE BRITISH JEWISH COMMUNITY TODAY

BY KEITH-KAHN-HARRIS AND BEN GIDLEY

Continuum, London and New York, 2010, viii+237 pages

Review by Antony Lerman

There is so little serious analytical writing on the contemporary state and current direction of the organised Jewish community in the UK that this substantial contribution to the subject by Keith Kahn-Harris and Ben Gidley should be welcomed. *Turbulent Times* is probing and revelatory, offering exactly the kind of self-reflection any minority community needs in order to understand itself and consider its future. It should be required reading for everyone in the community's 'most senior ranks'.

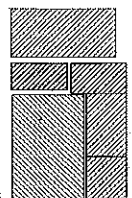
The book examines institutions and leaders, not grassroots developments. The authors begin by describing how the 'strategy of security', which continued the assimilatory policies of past decades, changed in the post-war world to become a full-blown 'strategy of insecurity'.

By the 1990s, this strategy was used by Jewish leaders, who were becoming more publicly assertive about their Jewishness, 'to motivate change'. Their principal priority was confronting the 'crisis' of continuity, to which the Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue, Jonathan Sacks, played such a large part in drawing attention.

Kahn-Harris and Gidley rightly emphasise the importance of burgeoning new social research data on British Jewry. This was made possible by a fundamental change in the attitude of Jewish leadership to community self-investigation (the 'reflexive turn', as the authors call it) and played a significant role in pushing questions of continuity higher up the agenda. It led to the creation of the ill-fated organisation

Jewish Continuity, whose vicissitudes are tellingly dissected, but 'generated a climate of change and innovation that proved influential'. While it initially focused on revolutionising Jewish education and opportunities for informal Jewish learning, the drive to revitalise the community in the 1990s and 2000s led to a broader Jewish 'renaissance', including the blossoming of myriad cultural initiatives. But not everyone approved of this 'venture into the unknown'. In some areas the community proved resistant to change—patterns and methods of representation being a major case in point—and denominational differences became increasingly intractable.

After 2000, with the perceived rise in the so-called 'new antisemitism', the strategy of insecurity produced a new defensiveness and various institutional changes that 'have been controversial and raise complex questions about the representation of British Jewry.' While the future remains uncertain and challenging, the authors believe, based on their analysis of how change came about over the past 20 years, that communal leaders can shape the future development of the community. But they face choices that lead in very different directions. The authors reject the defensive posture, 'the politics of nostalgic community', and favour a 'dialogical community', in dialogue with itself but also with the wider, multicultural world. 'When Jewish community becomes a polyphony of contending voices,' they argue, 'the resulting firmament generates creative solutions to the challenges of being a minority in multicultural Britain.'



Broadly speaking, this is a convincing narrative, and many of us who have been observing the community from a research and policy standpoint over the last decade or more will find that it echoes our own thoughts.

Nevertheless, for all their conceptual facility and fundamental grasp of the currents and trends in the Jewish community, the authors have not done themselves justice. The security/insecurity concept is bold and useful but its application is occasionally confusing and it's not clear exactly when its grip became tightened. The authors correctly identify the 2000s as characterised by a new defensiveness, which Jewish leaders justified on the grounds of the extreme threat posed by the 'new anti-Semitism.' Whether the term 'strategy of insecurity' can be applied to both the 1990s and the 2000s, when it's quite clear that the 1990s were a time of growing, positive assertiveness, with even the community's defence body recognising it as a time of diminishing antisemitism, seems doubtful to me.

Curiously for a book that claims to focus on community leadership, the question of exactly what or who was behind the post-2000 policy of defensiveness is never clarified. Quite willing—and rightly so—to be critical of named individuals earlier in community history, the authors appear somewhat shy when it comes to identifying key individuals and examining the motives of those responsible for the recent stress on insecurity. Whatever the reasons for this, the result is a critical lack of evidence to support the book's conclusions. Heavily reliant on information gleaned from interviews, the number and spread of the interviewees is also disappointingly narrow and of the nineteen named individuals only one woman was interviewed. The authors justify this on the grounds that it is 'a reflection of the male dominance in the most senior ranks of the British Jewish communal leadership' but not much imagination would have been required to come up with at least another eight prominent Jewish women whose voices demand to be

heard. Whether the list of male interviewees is, as claimed, drawn from the 'most senior ranks' is also dubious.

In the chapter 'New Antisemitism. New Insecurity', the argument for the existence of a 'new antisemitism' is extensively summarised. The counter-argument is, however, perfunctorily stated. One of several challenges to the insecurity discourse—the establishment of Independent Jewish Voices—is generously given five pages, but the description of it is inadequate and no one from the IJV steering group was interviewed.

Although the authors express concern about the 'hierarchical and oligarchical' leadership structure—something that IJV and other new initiatives, like Jewdas, have sought to confront—they seem to be unwilling to conclude that greater democracy and accountability within the community are needed to meet the challenges of the coming decades. Dialogue is essential, certainly, but unless there are pathways for the young and the newly engaged to participate in decision-making, they may well find a 'polyphony of contending voices' ultimately deeply frustrating.

There are a number of unfortunate errors—most glaring is the inaccurate figure given for the UK Jewish population in the very first line of the introduction—and some indecipherable jargon, which may not have made it to the published book had the authors trawled more widely for first-hand accounts and spent more time checking the text. Despite its weaknesses, *Turbulent Times* is an important contribution to a much-needed debate within the community about the future. It should be used as the basis for a series of seminars with participants representing as wide a cross-section of the Jewish population as possible. The 'most senior ranks' need to participate too, but in their current very defensive posture, it is doubtful whether many of them would be ready to take part in open discussions about the kind of controversial issues such seminars would need to address.

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