

YOUR JEWISH NEIGHBOUR¹

CHARLES SOLOMON

SINCE I am myself a Jew and the nature of my work constantly involves me in the activities of the Jewish people, I had supposed that the preparation of this paper would occasion me very little trouble. But the more I have considered the matter the more I have been forced to the—perhaps salutary—conclusion that really I know very little indeed about my own people.

In the first place we have to ask ourselves the apparently simple but perhaps insoluble question: what is a Jew? It has been truly remarked that a Jew is very easy to recognize and very hard to define.

There are, of course, definitions, but none that seem to me very satisfactory. According to Jewish religious law, a Jew (other than a proselyte) is the child of a Jewish mother—the faith of the father is not an essential factor. The test is, of course, logically indefensible, since we are bound to ask what made the mother Jewish, and to reply that she in turn was the daughter of a Jewish mother who derived her Jewishness from *her* mother, and so on for ever. We are thus landed in one of those infinite regressions that bedevil all logical argument. The same objection—together with a host of other objections—applied to Hitler's Nuremberg laws, according to which a Jew was a person, whatever his or her faith, who had one or more Jewish grandparents. That grandparent presumably was Jewish by reason of having the same stain on his or her escutcheon, and so on *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseam*.

The question, what is a Jew, has arisen from time to time in English law when it has become necessary to interpret penalty clauses in wills, such as bequests conditional on the legatee's marrying or not marrying a Jew. Although English courts are not as a rule favourably disposed to restrictive clauses relating to marriage, some of these testamentary documents have been held valid. It is doubtful whether any court has been able to decide

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once and for all what is a Jew; but the general opinion—to my mind an extremely sensible one—seems to be that a Jew is ‘one who when asked if he is a Jew says “yes”’. I find this definition the more satisfactory since it is one that definitely and unequivocally includes me within its scope.

If it is difficult to say what the Jews are, it is easy enough to say what they are not. Certainly they are not a ‘race’; if there ever was a homogeneous Jewish racial group the stock has become inextricably mingled since the dispersion with Mongols, Nordics, Mediterraneans, Chinese, Arabs, Africans and many other peoples. They are not a nationality, since a nation is a political entity normally with a geographical basis. They are something more than a religion pure and simple, since they differ in their beliefs even more than Christians do and yet feel themselves to be members of the same community. One may, I suppose, safely call them a ‘people’; but really this amounts to little more than saying that Jews are Jews.

Perhaps the most satisfactory solution is to describe Jewry, as Dr James Parkes does, as a ‘civilization, having its roots in the experience of the Jews in Palestine, and owing its survival to the nature of rabbinic Judaism’—that is to say, the Oral Law. ‘And of no civilization’, he goes on to say, ‘is it possible to draw such clear-cut frontiers that we can say that this man is just outside those frontiers and that man is just within them.’

If we reject, as we must, the egregious ‘racial’ theory, it is pertinent to ask why, in that case, we can recognize a Jew by his appearance alone. The answer, of course, is that as a rule we cannot do anything of the sort. Very often Englishmen can recognize English Jews, Poles can detect Polish Jews. But whether an Englishman would instantly observe the Jewishness of a Greek Jew I venture to doubt. It is by his aroma of ‘foreignness’ that a Jew is generally recognized; and since the Greek is a foreigner anyway I am not at all sure that the nuances differentiating the Greek Jew from the Greek Christian would be apparent to us.

Not all Jews are swarthy and not all of them have big noses. Indeed, even those Jews whom we do recognize would probably preserve their anonymity if they would keep their mouths shut and their hands still. They have a slightly sing-song intonation (like the Welsh) and a tendency to gesticulate (like the French). But these things, be it noted, are not ‘racial’ but social charac-

teristics, and they vary, too, according to the 'class' of the individual. Certainly in English upper and middle-class Jewish society 'to act Jewish' is definitely non-U.

The history of the Jews of England (and it is only with English Jews that I am concerned here) dates back, of course, very much further than the three hundred years since their so-called re-admission under Cromwell. There was a Jewish community in Norman England nearly nine hundred years ago, which continued until the expulsion of 1290.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that for some three hundred and fifty years there were no Jews in England. Individuals made their entry into the country, and during the sixteenth century there were small secret Jewish communities from Antwerp, who had fled thither from Spain and Portugal. The 're-admission' under Cromwell, therefore, amounted to no more than a recognition of the fact that there was in the statute book no law which made it impossible for Jews to reside in the country.

So far as is known, the Jews did not receive from Cromwell any formal document permitting them to remain in the country and practise their religion; it was merely tacitly understood that so long as they remained inconspicuous they would not be unduly interfered with. But the fact that no formal legislation was passed proved a blessing in disguise, since there was no law of the Protector which Charles II might have felt compelled to repeal after the Restoration.

Thus Jews of the seventeenth century had to discover step by step what were and what were not their privileges. It was not until 1682 that it was ruled that the religion of a Jewish plaintiff was no bar to his bringing an action.

In the early days of the resettlement the majority of the Jews in England were Sephardim—those who had originally come from Spain and Portugal. It was only towards the close of the seventeenth century that large numbers of Polish Jews (Ashkenazim) began to arrive, driven out by the persecutions of the Cossack leader Chmielnitzki, and in later years, of course, these were followed by thousands of refugees from persecution in other parts of Europe, including Russia and, in later years, Germany. In the early days of the resettlement the Sephardim were the unchallenged aristocracy of Anglo-Jewry, even when they began

to be outnumbered by the Ashkenazim. To-day they are numerically unimportant, although some aura of past grandeur still attaches to them. But 'all except their sun has set'. (Incidentally, I am an Ashkenazi.)

Although Sephardim and Ashkenazim regard themselves as members of the Anglo-Jewish community, there are still differences in their religious ritual and organization. All Ashkenazim are under the leadership of the Chief Rabbi (Dr Brodie), whose authority extends also to the Jewries of the British Commonwealth, while the Sephardim submit to the religious guidance of the Haham (Dr Gaon). The Beth Din, over which the Chief Rabbi presides, is British Jewry's final arbiter in all matters of ecclesiastical law; the United Synagogue, which to a great extent finances the Chief Rabbinate, consists of some seventy or eighty synagogues, and plays a large part in charitable and educational as well as synagogal affairs. There are in addition other orthodox synagogues (in particular the London Federation of Synagogues) which do not accept the authority of the Chief Rabbi. The status of both the Beth Din and the United Synagogue have been recognized by the British Parliament.

There are separatist bodies of Jews, rapidly growing in numbers and in importance, which are loosely combined in the movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism.

So far as secular Jewish bodies are concerned, much the most important is the Board of Deputies, formed nearly two hundred years ago. Its members are elected from synagogues and other communal bodies, and include Sephardim and Ashkenazim, orthodox and non-orthodox. The Board is recognized by Parliament as the representative body of Anglo-Jewry, and has on many occasions made representations to the Government on matters affecting Jews in this and in other countries. In charitable affairs the chief co-ordinating body is the Jewish Board of Guardians.

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned the extraordinary difficulty of defining a Jew. From this it follows that it is almost impossible to say how many Jews there are in Britain. The British census-taker poses no questions about the religious affiliations of the citizens with whom he is dealing; and an unofficial census of Jews would entail insuperable difficulties, technical as well as financial.

Attempts have been made by various methods of 'sampling'; and the consensus of opinion is that there are in Britain today something under half-a-million Jews. It is, I know, difficult to accept this figure; you are probably tempted to think (as I sometimes do) that you number more than that among your personal acquaintances.

One method that has been used is to count the number of interments in Jewish cemeteries, on the theory that any Jew, however negligent in his religious duties, will wish to be buried according to the traditional rites. The assumption seems to me doubtful; and it is, of course, also dependent on the supposition that the Jewish mortality rate is equivalent to that prevalent among non-Jews. Not only is there no warrant for this, but such facts as we have seem to be against it. Another method—probably no more and no less reliable—is to discover how many pupils are absent from school on the Day of Atonement, on which certainly very few Jewish parents would allow their children to attend school. All this produces evidence of a kind, no doubt, but evidence from which I personally should be sorry to draw deductions of any importance at all.

However, I do not think the figure can be far wrong, my own estimate being based on the weekly sales of the *Jewish Chronicle*. I think my method is at least as reliable as that of the statisticians!

There can, I think be little doubt that Anglo-Jewry is to-day a dying community. For this there are a number of reasons, various but to some extent interdependent. It is, in the first place, *physically* a dying community. The Jews of this country are not prolific, and children are not born in sufficient numbers to maintain the population. This is no very new phenomenon; but it has in the past been compensated for by the immigration of persecuted Jews in Europe who have sought refuge in this country—in many cases with great benefit to themselves and the country alike. Now Continental Jewry has been destroyed; and the relatively few Jews who do wish to emigrate are likely to choose either Israel or America as their goal.

Spiritually, too, I think Anglo-Jewry must be regarded as a dying community. This is one specialized case of what seems to me a general (if temporary) waning in the influence of religion, and it also has specific features to which I shall return in a minute. For though paradoxical it is, I think, universally true that religions

flourish best under persecution. It may be that the fleshpots of Egypt were a greater danger to Israel than the whips of the oppressor.

Statisticians (working on what, I must add, seem to me rather inadequate data) have estimated the birth-rate among Jews in this country at 11.6 per thousand as compared with a general birth-rate of 18.6 per thousand. Since the British are constantly being warned of the imminent danger of extinction because of a falling birth-rate, the seriousness of the threat facing Anglo-Jewry hardly needs stressing.

It may seem strange that a people divinely commanded to be fruitful and multiply should have become relatively sterile; and it is unlikely that this can be attributed to any one cause. It is, however, worth remembering that the Jews of this country are, by and large, fairly prosperous, and that the size of families generally varies in inverse proportion to the bread-winner's income. Then again, the Jews—even in Israel—tend to be an urban people, and it is almost invariably true that families in rural communities incline to be larger than in the cities. All over the country the average number of children in a Jewish family is less than two—so that even on the assumption that all Jews marry and that none die before marriageable age, there can still be no 'natural increase'. Furthermore, the Jewish death-rate is calculated at 13.2 per thousand as compared with a general death-rate of 12 per thousand.

Certainly all this presents a dismal picture; but I do not think we need despair. In the first place I have had sufficient experience of statistics to feel a profound distrust for them. And in the second place it is well to recall that populations, like evolution, proceed, not in a steady and inevitable progress, but by leaps and bounds alternating with periods of retrogression. I do not believe that the seed of Abraham and Isaac has become infertile. My grandfather had twelve children, my father four, I have two. But here, I maintain, the law of diminishing returns does not necessarily apply. It is not inevitable that my son will have only one child. I know of no reason why he should not beat my grandfather's record.

But while declining to envisage very seriously the physical extinction of Anglo-Jewry, it seems to me that there is a definite and indeed almost imminent danger of their disappearance as

Jews. For the climate of this country—not because of antisemitism but rather because of the absence of antisemitism—is unfavourable to Jewish survival. When to proclaim oneself a Jew may mean hardship, danger, even death, the indomitable spirit of man—or perhaps his sheer obstinacy—asserts itself. Just as fear stimulates the adrenal glands to permit us to cope with the causes of fear, so religious persecution stimulates a community to cohere in defence of its faith. But when to be a Jew is merely inconvenient, it is difficult to attain this mood of high resolve.

Probably few people outside the Jewish community realize how extremely inconvenient it is to be a Jew—at least, an orthodox Jew—in England today. For it must not be forgotten that Judaism is not a mere collection of dogmas but a way of life. It is not merely a matter of going to synagogue on Saturday instead of going to church on Sunday—although even there, of course, the loss of Saturday as a working day may be a heavy sacrifice. There are so many observances and rites that distinguish the Jew from the non-Jew, that mark him out as ‘different’—a misfit. The general population find him indigestible and have a desire (even though it be not wholly conscious) to eliminate him. And the Jew in his turn develops a defence mechanism; he will become over-humble, or arrogant, or both.

Nobody would wish to see a return to the life of the ghetto: yet it may be that for the Jew it was in some respects a healthier life. Though the *Goyim* might regard the Jew as an alien, in the ghetto he was a native; and life, however hard it might be, was organized on a Jewish basis. He did not have to look for a kosher butcher; there was no other kind of butcher. He lost no trade by closing his shop on the Sabbath; all shops were closed.

To come to material things, to be an orthodox Jew in England today is a very costly matter. It may, indeed, be economically ruinous. The orthodox Jew who is looking for a job will have to explain to his prospective employer that he will require to be free from work every Saturday and to leave early on Fridays during the winter months; that he will have to be excused on about ten other days for the principal Holy Days; and that should one of his parents die he will be absent from work throughout the week of mourning. One cannot blame the Christian employer who is not prepared to accede to all these demands; so that when a vacancy is advertised with the addendum ‘No

Jews need apply', this is not invariably to be attributed to crude antisemitism.

The Jew must buy specially killed meat, which costs him more. He must have clothing free from any mixture of linen and wool and this costs him more. He must have three sets of crockery and cooking utensils—one for meat dishes, one for milk products, and one for the Passover when he eats unleavened bread. On top of his civic duty to support general charity, he must finance the specifically Jewish charities, as well as giving money for Israel.

But having overcome these financial difficulties he is faced with a series of far more frustrating barriers in his social life. He is uneasily conscious of the likelihood of giving offence. He must refuse well-meant offers of hospitality because of the dietary laws; he must decline social engagements that will involve him in travelling on the Sabbath; if he is interested in sport he will find that practically all the events of major importance take place on the one day of the week when he cannot possibly attend them. In short, the orthodox Jew does not fit comfortably into English life; he is, in both senses of the term, a 'foreign body', and he is not easily assimilated.

In theory it may be that assimilation is possible; in practice it is not so, except at the cost of diluting or weakening Judaism. The Jewish boy who attends an English school will probably be excused attendance at New Testament classes; but English literature is permeated with the teachings of Christianity. You may bar the New Testament from your home; but your boy, if he is to be educated at all, must read Shakespeare, Chaucer, Bunyan. If he is to know anything about English history he can do so only against the background of religion. It is not enough to know of Henry VIII that he had six wives.

Of course it is possible to study other religions while retaining one's own faith unimpaired: but to do so would, I think, require very great strength of mind if the religion studied were that of the majority and the student of a minority faith. One may study Hinduism objectively in Balham; it might be dangerous to do so in Benares.

In any case, the orthodox Jewish boy will have little time to assimilate. He must learn Hebrew, and if—as many are—he is a first-generation Englishman, he probably speaks Yiddish at home. He must study the Torah—in itself a lifetime's work. He

must know, too, something of Hebrew and Yiddish secular literature. It is but rarely that such a boy can hope to acquire the English cultural background of the better products of our older universities.

Those Jews—members of the Liberal and Reform movements—who have attempted with some success to integrate themselves into English life have done so, I believe, at the cost of their Judaism. They protest—perhaps a little shrilly—that they have retained all that is essential in the religion, having discarded only outworn ceremonies and formalities. Apart from the fact that there is no objective test by which we may know that a ceremonial is outworn, this is dangerous doctrine. The existence of a faith without ritual is perhaps conceivable; but it doesn't work in practice. Ritual without faith is meaningless; but without ritual faith is hard put to it to survive.

The objection to Progressive Judaism is not that it is progressive but that it is a diminution of religion. It is orthodox Judaism shorn of its inconveniences. And it has—from my point of view—the added objection that it is so often a step towards conversion.

Since the Jews in this country represent only about one per cent of the population, the Jew of marriageable age finds his choice much restricted; and apart from that, if he has integrated himself into English culture he is likely to be tempted to seek an 'English' (i.e., non-Jewish) partner. Mixed marriages are to-day very common—it has been suggested that they account for something like one-sixth of all Jewish marriages—and in nearly every case this means a defection from Judaism. If the mother is non-Jewish, then the children are automatically not Jews. But in the case of marriage between a Christian man and a Jewish woman (when the children, according to Jewish law, are Jews) it is obvious that the pressure of the society in which they live is likely to attract them to the dominant faith.

Another factor that has affected Anglo-Jewry both directly and indirectly is the establishment of the State of Israel. I must confess I find it rather difficult to understand how the Diaspora Jew to-day can repeat the time-honoured prayer 'Next year in Jerusalem' when, if he is sincere, all he has to do is to board plane or ship and go there. Authorities as diverse as Arthur Koestler and David Ben-Gurion have maintained (to the vast annoyance of most English Jews) that the Jew is to-day faced with the

inescapable alternative of settling in Israel or abandoning Judaism. If that be true—and I think it is—then indeed Anglo-Jewry is doomed. Those who do not go to Israel will be absorbed by Christianity—an outcome which perhaps you will regard as desirable but which I, for obvious reasons, deplore.

And yet, I am not sure that you will regard the disappearance of Jews and Judaism as a wholly desirable consummation. If you think it worth while to study Jews and Judaism, your interest must, I think, be anthropological rather than archaeological. You do not regard Jews as fossilized survivors of a primitive people but as followers of one of the world's great religions, which you respect if you do not wholly accept.

Certainly I believe that were Jewry to disappear, the world, and particularly the world of the spirit, would have lost a vital constituent.