

Anglo Jewry Wakes Up

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I may have to eat my words. Anglo Jewry is alive and well! Not only, but there is a new era of younger, proactive professionals who know how to run organizations efficiently, how to deal with governments and civil servants, and handle the press and the new media. And, for the first time, they are supported by new generation of younger magnates, often with a far stronger command of Judaism and Jewish affairs than hitherto, who are seeing that funding is there for the right projects, so long as they are run by appropriate people. I detect a sea change! Even the ancient, crusty, much-maligned Board of Deputies is waking up and for the first time that I can remember, looking exciting!

If there is one more general item that proves the point, it is that this year, for the first time in Anglo Jewish history, there will be a march through the centre of London to celebrate Israel's 60th birthday. And it will be a march to rival New York's, a proper one, not hidden away in an arena or a sheltered square, but out in the open, in your face. Anglo Jews will parade out in the open and not be scared or embarrassed.

For the first time there is also a ground swell of support for Jewish education and day schools coming from beyond the fringes and even indeed from the growing number of mixed marriages (which I happen to think might, and I stress might, not necessarily be all bad, if some choose to retain a positive Jewish identity). What is more, this new wave of well-trained and well-supported lay leaders are coming from areas in Anglo Jewry outside the ghettos as well as within.

When I first entered the rabbinate my concern was the other way. Orthodoxy in Britain was dominated by the pseudo-Orthodox. The largest and mainstream religious body, the United Synagogue, was about as Orthodox as a belly dancer is modest and it did not contain one fully functional mikveh in the nineteen fifties. The mood of Anglo Jewry was most unfriendly towards the ultra-Orthodox world, which was regarded as an irrelevant fossil. Gateshead Yeshiva was regarded as a sort of Trappist retreat for the socially challenged. My mission, when I entered the rabbinate, was to fight for a more positive Orthodox perspective. I wanted to defend and encourage Torah study, yeshiva, Jewish education, when it was unfashionable, underfinanced, and looked on as for extremists only. No "normal" Anglo Jew would want to be associated with any of them, except occasionally for guilt money. Only one rich Anglo Jew then gave substantially to religious institutions and that was the colorful Isaac Wolfson.

At that time Orthodox spokesmen were being outgunned and outmaneuvered by the non-Orthodox, who seemed to have commandeered the media. Now things have changed so much that the boot is on the other foot. Ultra-Orthodoxy, Charedi Judaism, whatever label you want to use, has now come to dominate our thinking and our community to the point where even the Chief Rabbi trembles

before their onslaught.

This would not be perceived as problematic in a society open to discourse, disagreement, debate, and choice. But it is a feature of all examples of growing religious strength that it tends to stifle debate and impose conformity. That is why there are rebellious groups of religious youngsters who cannot find their places in strict orders, who may turn to religious violence. It's not just confined to other religions. Ours may not be as serious or as lethal, but look at recent riots and attacks by "ultra" youth in Beth Shemesh in Israel—even the Charedi establishment has decided that enough is enough. Others end up leading double-lives, as any clubber in London, New York, or Tel Aviv will testify.

At one stage I feared that the growth of Charedi communities, which I welcomed and supported, would lead to the Charedi-ization of all Anglo Jewry with the rest drifting away altogether. But now it seems the opposite is true. The stronger one section becomes, the stronger the community as a whole becomes, and it almost engenders creative competition. It's like when a McDonald's attracts a Pizza Hut and then a Kentucky Fried Chicken. More does mean more for everyone. More Jewish schools of whatever color will lead to more children identifying, in whatever ways, and that means more chances (never guarantees) of stronger Jewish commitment. A better-run, more successful community means more people are proud to be associated with it. Better institutions attract more funding. Up to now all the creative elements in Anglo Jewish life came from outside the establishment, from informal or unofficial elements. Now at last some sections of this old establishment, and I do only mean some, are getting their creative acts together.

Anglo Jewry is indeed far more religious and learned, cultural and creative than it ever was. The only black hole remains academia, where we have all but nothing (O.K., one or two really good ones, but most have been attracted elsewhere). In comparison to Israel, the USA, and France, Anglo Jewish academic life is a ghost.

Of course, too many Jews are still alienated. Some feel the community only values the wealthy. Some simply haven't been touched or inspired by anything to excite their identity. For every one brought back to Judaism, far more slide away. Despite all the new schools, we have nowhere near enough really good Jewish teachers.

But the signs are good. I'm an optimist, and after speaking to a successful magnate, a Board of Deputies guru, a teacher, and a social worker, I must say that I cannot recall as upbeat a mood in Anglo Jewry as a whole, ever.

There are of course still fears that the flaccid, apathetic British and the rest of Europe still haven't still woken up to the threat to their values that rampant fundamentalism presents. But then the only response is indeed to fight back. So I'm delighted there are people in the Jewish and non-Jewish community who are taking these issues seriously. Well done people—enjoy the parade.