

Whisper Jews

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There has always been a strain in parts of, mainly nonreligious, Anglo-Jewry that is apologetic and reluctant to assert itself.

Roger Cohen is a columnist for the New York Times with a reputation for criticizing Israel. He was born and educated in the UK, lived for a time in the USA, and is now residing in London again. In a recent article, [Jews in a Whisper](#), he reiterated that need that too many Anglo-Jews have to tone themselves down. It is as if they are ashamed of publicly admitting their identity.

Cohen quotes Philip Roth from his novel [Deception](#)[✖], where the American protagonist says to his British mistress, "In England, whenever I'm in a public place, a restaurant, a party, the theater, and someone happens to mention the word 'Jew', I notice that the voice always drops just a little." She challenges him on this observation, prompting the American, a middle-aged writer, to say, yes, that's how "you all say 'Jew'. Jews included." Cohen's article continues:

This prompted a memory: sitting with my mother in an Italian restaurant in the upscale London neighborhood of St. John's Wood circa 1970 and asking her, after she had pointed to a family in the opposite corner and said they were Jewish, why her voice dropped to a whisper when she said the J word.

"I'm not whispering," Mom said and went on cutting up her spaghetti so it would fit snugly on a fork.

None of this carried malice as far I could see. It was just flotsam carried on the tide of an old anti-Semitism. The affable, insidious English anti-Semitism that stereotypes and snubs...In Britain I find myself exasperated by the muted, muffled way of being a Jew. Get some pride, an inner voice says, speak up!

Cohen goes on to talk about the present day situation in the UK:

Traditionally, England's genteel anti-Semitism has been more of the British establishment than the British working class, whereas anti-Muslim sentiment has been more working-class than establishment. Now a ferocious anti-Zionism of the left – the kind that has called for academic boycotts of Israel – has joined the mix, as has some Muslim anti-Semitism.

So far, so good. But then, lo and behold, Cohen does his usual flip. He wants

Anglo-Jews to stand up and protest against Jewish critics of Islamic fanaticism. Anglo-Jews, he implies (and Israelis), line up with "Islamophobes".

He cites [Melanie Phillips](#). If ever there was an example of desperately trying to curry favor, this has to be it. Right-wing fascists and skinheads who attack Muslims are no friends of the Jews, and alliances with them are madness that can only be explained by insecurity. But when Cohen tars Ms. Phillips with that brush he is guilty of the very sin himself.

All she has done is to point out the cowardice of Westerners who fail to take a stand against or recognize the dangers of extreme Islam, and refuse to be cowed by the bully tactics of Muslim extremists or the scorn of the 'chattering classes.' She has consistently stood up against bias and prejudice against the wider Muslim community, but she also courageously and almost singlehandedly highlights anti-Semitism in all its guises.

But anyone whom Mr. Cohen disagrees with must be wrong. He recognizes the Anglo Jewish disease but cannot identify his own pathology. The very English education he identifies has infected him too. Recently, the novelist Howard Jacobson got into trouble too for wondering aloud whether he too might not be attacked by the increasing number of Islamic anti-Semites on UK streets. But what Mr. Cohen typifies is something else.

European countries are made up of vertical societies and class hierarchies. They encourage one to escape one's foreign roots into a "higher" order. Unless one is confident in one's difference, one feels second-class. The USA is a horizontal society. Of course there are prejudices and small groups of well-connected power brokers. But there are lots of other equally powerful parallel groups who can confidently exert counter-pressure. The European Jew feels he doesn't quite belong. The American Jew knows he does.

And there's another feature, in terms of Jewish history specifically. Since the Enlightenment, Jews have been free to abandon religion as their defining characteristic. The early "Maskillim", those Jews who sought to escape the physical and religious constraints of the ghetto, were still deeply educated in Jewish history and culture. As the years have gone by and the bonds with tradition loosened, nonreligious Jews have sought substitutes for the Jewish religion.

First it was being Germans, or any nationality, of the Jewish Faith. Then it was secular Zionism. Afterwards came the Holocaust, and when that paled there was Soviet Jewry. For the religious Jew these were all important issues, but ones that came on top of a religious foundation. Without that foundation which has remained consistent through these passing fashions, as each issue recedes, the nonreligious Jew has to find a new one. Distancing oneself from the Jewish homeland and all it implies is the new cause, because it enables Jews to ally themselves either with Left-Wingers or with Muslim minorities in the West, and it enables them to feel citizens of the world, internationalists, rather than Jews constrained by the particular history and the specific land of their heritage.

That is Roger Cohen's issue. He is indeed a Jew, but one who would rather escape its limitations if he could.