

British Jewry and its attitudes to intermarriage

by

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Introduction

The present-day British Jewish community traces its origins to 1656 when, after representations to Cromwell by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, Jews were allowed to worship openly in England. Thus, in European Jewish terms, modern British Jewry is relatively young. This re-establishment, following an absence of over 360 years, was never formalised by any law that recognised the Jews as a community. We have no special obligations in respect of the host society and no benefits, such as the proceeds of local religious taxes. Jews, as individuals and as a community, have gained rights along with—and sometimes in the wake of—other religious minorities such as non-conformists and Roman Catholics. The community did not directly suffer population loss from the Holocaust, although the blitz accelerated the decline of the area of first settlement in London’s East End and ultimately, Britain received many post-war immigrants. In the century since the mass immigration from East and Central Europe the Jewish community, which is 83% British-born, has become well integrated into the open, British society.

In spite of the lack of separation of church and state, Britain is a secular country. The British Social Attitudes survey distributed in 2000 found that, of the 3,426 adults living in private households sampled, 39.5% said they had ‘no religion’¹. Johnston and Jowell in commenting noted that this proportion has grown dramatically from 31% in 1983.²

However, the voluntary³ religion question on the 2001 census of England and Wales found only 16% with ‘no religion’. On the census, 71.2% noted that they are Christian, and 5% belonged to minority religions; 3% were Muslim, Hindus 1% and Jews are one-half of 1%. The censuses of England and Wales and Scotland together showed 266,375 people self-identifying as Jews in reply to that voluntary question. This Jewish population is approximately the size of that of Greater Chicago but is spread throughout a country rather than a conurbation.

¹ They were asked whether they regarded themselves as belonging to any religion. 0.8% said they regarded themselves as Jewish, 2% were Muslim and 1% Hindu. 55% were Christian.

² M. Johnston and R. Jowell (2001), *How robust is British civil society?* In A Park et al (eds), *British Social Attitudes – the 18th Report*. (London: Sage Publications/National Centre for Social Research)

³ 92.7% of the population gave details about their religion, or lack of it.

In spite of any lack of constitutional legal standing, the community receives funding for services such as education and welfare. For the former, 39 voluntary-aided Jewish day schools receive local authority support for the National Curriculum (secular) studies they provide but the parents pay for Jewish studies⁴. For the latter, Jewish homes and other services are partly financed through local government where an individual's funding entitlement is channelled through the Jewish agencies. There are more than 100 Jewish welfare organisations nationally⁵ most of which are based in the Greater London area.

By the standards of many communities, British Jewry is highly centralised and has a socio-religious structure that somewhat mirrors the national. The leading elected representative organisation is the Board of Deputies of British Jews, founded in 1760, which interfaces with central government on behalf of the community. It currently has 271 deputies who are elected by synagogues and organisations from all areas. The right-wing orthodox synagogues do not seek membership on the Board but their viewpoint is voiced through deputies who may represent more mainstream institutions. The Board as 'the voice of the Jewish community' consults, co-ordinates and cooperates to present the community's stance on matters ranging from faith schools, to shechita, Israel, anti-semitism and welfare provision. Lately, the government has made clear that it wishes to have one central contact point for each faith community and the Board is that point for British Jewry.

The United Synagogue, as the single largest synagogal organisation, is sometimes regarded as the Jewish parallel to the Church of England and constitutes a second element in the traditional British Jewish establishment. Jewish Care as the major welfare provider and the United Jewish Israel Appeal (UJIA) as the main fundraising body complete this group of institutions. British Jewry does not have co-ordinated fundraising or a community chest although the idea has been discussed from time to time and was tried, but not very profitably, in one medium sized regional community.

The synagogue is the main membership institution in the community: there are 356 congregations in Britain. These range in size from the large, central London cathedral-like synagogues which draw their membership from across and outside the metropolis to shteibls with a small, regular local minyan. Surveys have shown that some 70% of British Jewry is in some way linked to a synagogue.⁶ This proportion has been constant for some 40 years and in part owes its consistency to the way in which Jewish burials are organised in Britain. The majority of synagogues have a burial society and synagogue fees contain an element for funeral expenses, which most people pay. These funeral expenses are for the most part not transferable between synagogues with the result that, having once joined a particular synagogue and paid

⁴ There are also 56 independent (private) Jewish day schools which do not receive state funding. Most of these are *haredi*.

⁵ *Directory of Jewish Social Services* (2003), London: Board of Deputies

⁶ Schmool M. and F. Cohen, (1998) *A Profile of British Jewry*, (London: Board of Deputies)

funeral fees, it is difficult to move synagogues without possible financial loss. This has been a force for conservatism within British synagogue life.

The United Synagogue has 64 constituent and affiliated congregations, mainly in the Greater London area. The United Synagogue was established by Act of Parliament in 1870 and, strictly speaking, the Chief Rabbi is head of these synagogues. There are regional orthodox congregations throughout Britain and the Commonwealth that recognise his authority and leadership but there are also, even within the mainstream orthodox sector in London, synagogues that do not. Beyond those, there are the *haredi* communities on one side and the progressive sector on the other. This is made up of the Masorti, Reform and Liberal synagogal groups. There are 86 Union of Orthodox synagogues (mainly *haredi* with some modern orthodox). Of the 87,790 households with synagogue membership in 2001⁷, 57% were of Mainstream (traditional) Orthodox, 20% Reform, 9% each Liberal and Union of Orthodox, 3% Sephardi and 2% Masorti.

Population estimates

In common with other Western European communities, and especially in line with the United States, British Jewry saw its fastest growth and demographic change between 1880 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1918. Lipman⁸ estimates that in this period the British Jewish community grew from 60,000 to 300,000 as a result of immigration and the natural increase associated with it.

In lieu of census data throughout the 20th century, the Jewish community relied on a series of indirect estimates based on the death-rates method. Simply put the resulting population relates to a 'final status' definition of a Jew: although a person may not have in any way lived as a Jew, s/he was buried as a Jew. The method initially employed crude death rates for England and Wales to extrapolate a population figure from the total number of Jewish deaths, but over time the death-rates used were refined and age/sex specific rates adjusted for social class are currently applied to deaths categorised by age and sex for five-year age groups. The first results of this method were published in the 1896 Jewish Year Book and the latest in 1995⁹ and the population so estimated may be regarded as the core British Jewish population. In 1995 the estimate given was 305,000 for the period 1984-88 and since then adjustments have been made by allowing for annual loss noted from births and deaths recorded in the community, reducing the estimate to some 283,000 by the end of the century. No allowance, however, could be made for possible outcomes of migration.

The method continues to be used so that trend data can be maintained and the indirect estimates compared with the census data as it comes online. Estimates are in hand for the periods 1989-1993, 1994-98

⁷ Schmool M. and F. Cohen (2002) *British Synagogue Membership 2001*, (London: Board of Deputies)

⁸ Lipman, V.D. (1990), *A History of the Jews in Britain since 1858* (Leicester University Press)

and 1999-2003. At the same time, analyses of Jewish deaths by age and sex for 1999-2003 (mid-point 2001) will be used in conjunction with the 2001 census tabulation by age to develop age-sex specific death rates for Jews which may be compared with those used for extrapolating population by deaths.

Three specific aspects of British Jewry together made possible this repeated use of the death-rates method, even in the days before computers. These are its relatively small size, its centralisation, and the way in which its burial societies are organised. From its pivotal non-religious position within British Jewry, since the mid-1960s the Community Research Unit of Board of Deputies has been able to capitalise on these factors and by drawing on the support of all sectors of the community—whether or not they are represented among the deputies—has co-ordinated the raw deaths' data on which the indirect population estimates were based. This regular fundamental work gradually confirmed the Community Research Unit as a provider of Jewish data both within and beyond the Jewish community. Thus when the religious groups, through the London-based Interfaith Network¹⁰, began to lobby for the inclusion of a question about religion on the 2001 census of England and Wales, the Community Research Unit put forward the Jewish community's needs. At the same time as the development work was being conducted by the Office of National Statistics, the Board itself debated the wisdom of supporting a religion question in the light of Jewish historical susceptibilities and questions of civil liberties, and backed the inclusion of the question at its full monthly meeting in July 1999.

Census parameter

As stated earlier, the self-identifying Jewish population recorded by the censuses of Great Britain numbered 266,375. This one-number count may be compared with the 283,000 indicated by indirect estimates and corrections through vital statistics and annual compilations. After allowances are made for non-response to the religion question and for undercounts in haredi areas,¹¹ the census figure suggests a core Jewish population of 300,000. However, the accuracy or finality of this one number is of only secondary consideration. The censuses, whether we look at England and Wales alone (259,927) or add in the 6,448 Jews in Scotland, may be regarded as providing the very largest sample of British Jews yet available and it is the patterns of Jewish social structure that we can obtain from them that are important to the community.

The most unexpected result of the census was that all but one¹² of the 150 first-tier local authority areas in England and Wales¹³ recorded a Jewish presence, giving some 52,000 Jews who are spread widely

⁹ Haberman, S. and M. Schmool (1995), *Estimates of British Jewish Population 1984-88*. In: The Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A, No 58, Part 3, pp 542-562. (London)

¹⁰ There are nine faiths on the Network where the Board of Deputies represents the Jewish community.

¹¹ These are particularly identifiable through comparisons with earlier studies and data on synagogue membership.

¹² This was the Scilly Isles off the extreme south west tip of England.

throughout Britain¹⁴, away from Jewish centres. This number is double that previously suggested by the indirect estimates which, *faut de mieux*, depended on patterns of synagogue membership to show geographical distribution. In terms of Jewish identity it is interesting that so many Jews in areas removed from Jewish facilities and services were ready to affirm their Jewishness while many living in Jewish heartlands were not. The finding has surprised leaders of smaller regional communities who have not found these numbers reflected in either their local congregations or in take up of activities and services such as synagogue classes. It is difficult to compare the demographic profiles of the more heavily Jewish against the dispersed sectors. Are the geographically spread Jews older, more likely to be intermarried, or in unusual occupations? Regrettably there was no question on length of residence in an area so that we cannot, for example, seek to find whether older people have moved to the country on retirement or have lived in such an area for some time.

General demographic patterns

For over 30 years, indirect research has shown that the Jewish community in Britain is aged when compared with British society at large. The census data shown in Table 1 confirm these earlier findings. Thus while nationally 16% of the population was aged 65 and over, 22% of the Jewish population were in this age group. The difference is even more marked when those 75 and over are compared. Here, the national proportion was 7.6% as against 12.5% for Jews. The greater longevity of women is reflected in the fact that 14.7% of Jewish women were aged 75 and over compared with 10.2% of Jewish men. In contrast, only 17% of the Jewish population was aged 24 and under, compared with 31% of the total population.

The table below shows that 70.4% of the Jewish population was in the age-range 16 to 74, i.e. potentially economically active. 64.1% of these 182,870 Jews were either working or looking for work—whether full- or part-time—9.8% were students, and 26% were termed 'economically inactive'. Of the 112,600 Jews in work, 30% were self-employed either full- or part-time compared with a national proportion of 13.7%. Students were, of course, mainly in the 16–24 age group where 61% of young Jews may be compared with 41% nationally. The remaining 47,751 Jews in the 16–74 age-range were in the main retired persons (46%) or at home looking after a home and family (26.6%)¹⁵. The high proportion of students is mirrored in the high educational attainment of the 16 - 74 year old Jewish group. While 35.8% of Jews had

¹³ The Jewish population in Scotland is found mainly in the Glasgow area. Numbers of Jews in other areas are very small, except for Edinburgh where some 760 people self-identified.

¹⁴ See Schmol, M., R. Hart and F. Cohen (2003), *The Relaxation of Community?* (London: Board of Deputies)

¹⁵ All except 505 were women

higher level qualifications, the proportion was 19.8% for the population as a whole. In direct contrast, nationally 36% had no educational qualifications, the proportion for Jews was 23%.¹⁶

The relationship between educational attainment and career prospects is confirmed when we look at the occupation structure of the Jewish population: 24% of employed Jews aged 16–74 were in higher managerial and professional occupations (compared with 11.8% nationally), 36% were in lower managerial and professional occupations (national proportion 26%). A further 15% were small employers and own account workers. 13% of all economically active Jews, compared with 6% of the total population, were self-employed.

In sum, the census data confirm previous survey research findings and show that British Jewry conforms to the aging, middle-class, professional educated pattern common throughout the diaspora.

Table 1: Age and sex distribution of Jews and total population, England and Wales, 2001*

	Jews		England and Wales
Number	259,927		52,041,916
		%	%
Sex			
Men	124,769	48	49
Women	135,158	52	51
Age group			
0-15	44,577	17.2	20.2
16-24	25,489	9.8	10.9
25-49	82,385	31.7	35.5
50-59	36,617	14.1	12.6
60-64	13,004	5	4.9
65-74	25,375	9.8	8.4
75+	32,480	12.5	7.6

¹⁶ The term 'no qualifications' describes people without any academic, vocational or professional qualifications while the term 'higher level' refers to first degrees, higher degrees, NVQ levels 4 and 5, HND, HNC and certain professional qualifications.

Marriage and Intermarriage

Data on Jewish marriage in Britain since the period 1960-64 show that the average number of persons marrying in a synagogue has fallen from 3690 per annum to 1794 for 1998-2001.¹⁷ This decline is to some extent a reflection of both the British Jewish age-structure and Jewish participation in the move from marriage to cohabitation. In addition, because Jewish marriage numbers are collated from communal records, they do not cover exogamous marriages. These, unless preceded by conversion¹⁸, have never been included in Jewish statistics and, since British statutory data do not record the religion of partners at time of marriage, it has never been possible to look to secular marriage registers or Office of National Statistics tables for marriages involving Jews yet formalised outside the synagogue.

Although grass roots observation and inference from data on the fall off in synagogue marriage had testified for almost three decades to the rise in intermarriage, the first hard, nationwide direct evidence on the matter came from the 1995 Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) survey of the Social and Political Attitudes of British Jews. This showed that 50% of married/partnered men under 30 years old were in interfaith partnerships compared with 38% of all married/partnered men. The figure for women was 'more difficult to estimate'¹⁹ and was placed in the range of 20–25%, suggesting a rate of intermarriage of 30% for men and women of all ages together. In addition, 8% of the sample reported having had a steady relationship with a non-Jew at some time in the past, rising to 60% among those currently single and 68% for unmarried respondents aged between 22 and 39.²⁰

Before this, the survey of Women in the Jewish Community²¹ had looked in some detail into the marriage experience of two groups of women: those affiliated to synagogues and not so affiliated. Of the affiliated, 89% had been married once and a further 10% twice: 90% of first marriages were to Jews with the proportion falling to 74% for second marriages. In the less affiliated, younger group, 63% had had one stable relationship (mainly a marriage) and 26% had had two: 60% of first relationships had been with Jews compared with 46% of second partnerships. While these fall-offs in Jewish partners at second marriage may reflect the lack of available, suitable Jewish men as women grow older, at the very least they also

¹⁷ *Annual Compilations of Vital Statistics* (London: Board of Deputies)

¹⁸ Whether under orthodox or progressive auspices. Halachically, these of course are not intermarriages.

¹⁹ Miller, S., M. Schmool and A. Lerman, (1996), *Social and Political Attitudes of British Jews: Some Key Findings from the JPR Survey*, (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research), p.12.

²⁰ Goldberg, J., and B.A. Kosmin, (1997) *The social attitudes of young unmarried Jews in contemporary Britain*, (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research)

reflect a willingness on the part of some women to take a non-Jewish partner even if they were previously married to a Jew.

Over the past 15 years, the issues surrounding intermarriage have been mediated by communal seminars held by the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain for interfaith couples and their parents. The fact that these seminars continue to be arranged confirms their importance; they permit a communal conversation.

Attitudes towards intermarriage

These regular seminars for intermarried couples are one proof that intermarriage is squarely faced by (at least one section of) the community, and is not simply bemoaned and deplored. Common questions and interests are examined and a growing openness can be judged from newspaper reports and articles, setting a gentler atmosphere for communal discussion. Although parents initially may be only marginally supportive of a non-Jewish daughter/son-in-law, they seem gradually to accept her/him. While 40% of participants, replying to a questionnaire distributed at the seminars in the early 1990s,²² reported that parents had originally been supportive, 66% said their parents had eventually come to support their choice. Where objections had to be overcome, these were especially from older family members. This was the pattern in the 1990s. There has been no large-scale research on the topic over the past eight years, but my impression is that, within the mainstream community, objections are less frequently voiced and a child's choice of partner is accepted, even if with private reservations.

Some non-Jewish partners, who may not convert, are willing to have their children brought up as Jews and are welcomed to family events, such as seder and other festivals, with reduced levels of secrecy and shame on the part of parents and grandparents. Furthermore, the level of interest—at wide-ranging education conferences and seminars—in demographic patterns in general, and intermarriage in particular, reflects the impact of intermarriage on the social fabric of and intercourse within British Jewry. The willingness to discuss these matters is grounded in both personal and familial experience and broad communal changes in attitude.

Both the Women in the Community and the JPR studies included questions which probed attitudes to intermarriage. Four of those questions were common to both studies, in the form of agree/disagree statements, set out as the first three items in Table 2. Additionally, those ever-married or in a partnership were asked whether or not 'it is purely by chance that I married a Jew'.

²¹ Schmool, M. and S.H. Miller, (1994), *Women in the Jewish Community*, (London: Women in the Community)

²² Special calculations, Board of Deputies' Community Research Unit

As an introductory overview of communal opinion, Table 2 gives the proportion agreeing or strongly agreeing with those statements common to the two studies. As can be seen from Statement 1, which sets the context, slightly more than half of those in the large, random cross-community JPR sample opposed intermarriage, with women taking this viewpoint more frequently than men. The percentage for women here is in line with that of the total in the Women 1994 study although there is a marked difference between attitudes of the affiliated and unaffiliated women. Nevertheless, however much exogamy is unwelcome, acting to ensure endogamy is another matter. Only a little over one-third of the JPR sample would do everything they could to prevent a child marrying someone who was not Jewish while two-in-five of the more synagogue-linked Women would take preventative action. Again, those affiliated to a synagogue—who are older and mainly members of mainstream orthodox synagogues—feel very much more strongly than do the unaffiliated.

Beyond expressing feelings of ethno-religious solidarity, this latter response may, of course, be founded in the realistic understanding that, by the time an adult child comes to choose a life-partner, it is too late to prevent any course of action.

Table 2: Attitudes toward intermarriage, proportion strongly/agreeing, named studies

	JPR 1995			Women 1994		
	All	Men	Women	All	Affil	Unaffil
Number in sample*	2094	1201	893	1326	1104	222
	%	%	%	%	%	%
1 A Jew should marry someone who is also Jewish	57	54	62	68	74	42
2 If my son or daughter wishes to marry a non-Jew I would do everything possible to prevent it	36	35	38	40	44	19
3 Having a Jewish partner is only important if you intend to have children.	11	11	11	10	9	12
4 It is purely by chance that I married a Jew	8	7	10		15	Not asked

* Response rates varied slightly from statement to statement in both studies

The last two statements in Table 2 in their different ways support endogamy among Jews, whatever a person's individual circumstances. In both samples, only about 10% associated Jewish marriage specifically with having Jewish children (statement 3). The corollary is that if you do not intend to have

children, then the religion of your partner is immaterial. By disagreeing with this, just under 90% of the Women sample supported endogamy in all instances²³.

This affirmation is strengthened by the low level of agreement to Statement 6 in Table 3 below, which also links marriage and child-bearing; second marriages should also be between two Jews. In line with these values, the final statement in Table 2 shows that the vast majority of those ever-married chose to marry Jewishly; it did not happen by chance.

The Women's study was seen as an aid to communal action in the early 1990s when the Jewish Continuity programme was the focus of so much of Diaspora activity. Ways of counteracting intermarriage were important parts of that discussion and agree/disagree statements used then but not repeated in the JPR study are set out in Table 3. There, statement 4 voices the long-standing, extreme communal response to intermarriage which received very little support among the women sampled, especially the unaffiliated. In contrast, statements 3 and 5 suggest a more open view, to which more than half the sample subscribed, and which indicates that non-Jews would be welcomed as part of community. Rather than their losing a son or daughter, the community should find a way to include non-Jewish partners. This relative liberalism may be a response by some to the feeling that ‘nothing can be done to reduce the rate of intermarriage’—a view which 26% of women held. The liberalism sits well as a solution to the removal of barriers against a world, previously viewed as hostile, that now is accessible and exciting.

Table 3: Further attitudes toward intermarriage, proportion strongly/agreeing, Women’s study 1994

	All	Affiliat'd	Unaffil'd
Number in sample*	1326	1104	222
	%	%	%
1 Nothing can be done to reduce the rate of intermarriage	26	27	34
2 If a Jew falls in love with a non-Jew they should live together rather than get married	12	12	11
3 Conversion to Orthodox Judaism should be made much easier	53	54	51
4 A Jew who marries a non-Jew should be cut off from the community	5	6	1
5 Rabbis should be more helpful in welcoming non-Jewish partners into the community.		60	Not asked
6 Once someone already has children, it doesn't matter if s/he marries a non-Jew later on		13	Not asked

* Response rates varied slightly from statement to statement

²³ 9% were not sure

Discussion

The data discussed above delineate a broad spectrum of attitudes towards intermarriage over the last decade of the 20th century. They were surveyed at the time of the Oslo Accords but prior to Rabin's assassination, the breakdown of the Peace Process and the current Intifada. All these events have left their mark on British Jewry—the first helped towards a climate of optimism that may have found expression in the responses to the intermarriage questions. The last three have subsequently led to soul-searching. Israel-related events, as reported by the British media, are considered one cause of rising anti-Semitism. The outside world is again problematic for some, although there are no surveys to measure how this has affected attitudes. Young British Jews, as students, have faced much anti-Israel activity on campus but for the most part have not had to deal with more widespread day-to-day anti-Semitism. Will this resurgence²⁴ mean that they and other young adults will turn inward to the community for reassurance? Will this be reflected in their choice of partners and their attitudes to intermarriage?

Over the past ten years there has been an expansion of Jewish day school education, not simply for the *haredim* but also within the London, mainstream community. New primary schools have been established in areas with young Jewish families and there are some moves to open a new secondary school for these places. Both providers and parents view these schools as a bulwark against assimilation. To what extent is there a correlation between this growth in Jewish education and the recognised increase in intermarriage? Do parents see attendance at Jewish day schools as a way of ensuring that their children marry-in?

All the attitudinal data discussed in this paper come from sample surveys of Jews and, even if the respondents were not affiliated to the organised Jewish community, they were interested enough to return a postal questionnaire, which of itself suggests some level of engagement with Jewish concerns. The most-widely drawn group is that of the JPR 1995 survey where the sample was taken from electoral, not community, lists, and picked up a number of respondents with no formal communal links. The geographical distribution of self-identifying Jews in the 2001 census shows just how many such people there are. Their demographic profile is likely to differ from those in more concentrated Jewish areas; their attitudinal profile may differ similarly. The Board of Deputies Community Research Unit has commissioned census tabulations from the Office of National Statistics to examine Jewish marriage patterns and allow comparisons of different types of communities. These patterns may suggest just how widespread particular attitudes may be and help communal leaders evaluate what it means for the community at a time when interest in Jewish numbers is again at the forefront.

²⁴ This was most recently publicised in an article in *The Times* on 1st December, where the Archbishops of Canterbury and of Westminster were reported as joining the Chief Rabbi in condemning the rise in attacks on Jews.