

Jewish multiculturalism

Michael Rosen

I came from what used to be a particular lineage amongst the many Jewish groups stereotyped by antisemites and Nazis as 'Jewish Communists', 'Jewish Bolsheviks', or 'Cultural Marxists'. My parents joined the British Communist Party (CPGB) in their teens when faced with Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the East End of London. They stayed in the CPGB until 1957, when thousands left the party after the Hungarian Uprising. My father came to this politics via his mother and grandfather (an immigrant from Poland), and from his absent father who stood for the Socialist Party in an election in the US. In my parents' circle of friends and acquaintances there seemed to be a never-ending stream of people with similar views and backgrounds: Jewish Communists or Socialists with origins in Eastern Europe. As an adult, it's become obvious to me that this stream came out of the struggles of working-class Jews in the 19th century in Poland and Russia, through organisations like the Jewish Labour Bund or the left-wing parties in Russia prior to the 1917 Revolution.

Now, Twitter is not the perfect place for working out questions of Jewish identity, but I guess that it does have the advantage of drawing up battle lines. Just recently, any Jew who made it known they supported Jeremy Corbyn quickly discovered that this drew rage and/or derision from both Jews and non-Jews who maintained that Corbyn was an antisemite, or at the very least did little or nothing to deal with antisemites in the Labour

Party. Such anger often raised questions about the *Jewishness* of these Corbyn supporters and, on many occasions, they were abused *as Jews*: Corbyn defenders were described in sinister terms as ‘useful Jewish idiots’, ‘koshering antisemitism’, ‘used Jews’, or as ‘having donned the cloak of Jewishness’. The term ‘as-a-Jew’ circulated, a piece of satire mocking statements that began, ‘As a Jew... etc. etc.’ Because some (many?) of the Jews supporting Corbyn weren’t religious, questions were raised about whether they really were ‘part of the community’. And when it was clear that some Corbyn-supporting Jews were religious, it was pointed out repeatedly that they were a tiny minority and in no way representative of the vast majority of Jews. Among those few who supported Corbyn yet somehow escaped this wrath were the Jewish candidates who worked hard to get elected and to try and secure a Labour victory.

Among the Tories, Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg were given a free pass, even though both had displayed antisemitic language and behaviour. In his role as editor of the *Spectator* from 1999 to 2005 Johnson continued to provide a platform for ‘Taki’, whose columns for the magazine have been littered with racist and antisemitic references; in his own ‘racy’ novel *Seventy-Two Virgins*, Johnson ‘depicted Jews as controlling the media and being able to “fiddle” elections’.¹

For his part Rees-Mogg used the unequivocally antisemitic trope ‘Illuminati’ to describe his Jewish parliamentary colleagues². In the course of a debate on Brexit, he retweeted a video of a speech by the leader of the virulently anti-immigrant party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). At no stage did those

¹ The Independent December 9, 2019

² <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/european-institute/news/2019/sep/jacob-rees-moggs-alarmed-cry-illuminati>

Jews supporting Johnson and Rees-Mogg, or the other front bench Tories given to using phrases like 'cultural Marxists' or 'north London metropolitan elite', receive more than a fraction of the criticism that was directed at Jewish Corbyn supporters.

Some of the most vocal in the charge against Corbyn had also openly and explicitly made it clear that there were even bigger fish to fry than working to defeat a Corbyn-led Labour Party. Stephen Pollard made this view clear in his 2006 'Maida Vale Manifesto'. What was at stake in 21st century Britain was a battle to save Western Civilisation [sic], and anyone of any left-wing party was anathema: "The Left, in any recognisable form, is now the enemy."³ Shortly after, in 2008 Pollard was appointed as the editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*, where he remains. Among those singled out as enemies long before Corbyn appeared on the scene were two secular Jewish Labour MPs, Margaret Hodge and Ed Miliband, both attacked in long articles in the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*, respectively. In the case of Miliband, under its headline 'The man who hated Britain', the author of the article, Geoffrey Levy, used it to link him to his father Ralph Miliband's background as both a Jewish immigrant and a Marxist intellectual.⁴ Wasn't this an odd place for the article to appear, given that the *Daily Mail* had been an enthusiastic and vociferous supporter of Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s?

Later, *The Sun* would run a front-page article on Miliband with the caption 'Save our bacon' running alongside a picture of him awkwardly in mid-bite of a bacon sandwich. All this tells me that swirling around the media frenzy over Corbyn and antisemitism were matters that remained in the shadows:

³ Stephen Pollard. World Heritage Encyclopedia, Project Gutenberg

⁴ *Daily Mail*, 27 September, 2013.

long-standing battles between left-wing and right-wing Jews, with some not against using the argument that left-wing Jews were *not really Jews*.

Inevitably, this furore around the Corbyn Labour Party, going back to the previous Miliband era, has raised questions for me about Jewish identity in contemporary politics. It is interesting to see the steady rise of a new orthodoxy that claims to speak 'for the community'. Even where no such claims are made, the media has often suggested that figures or institutions such as the Chief Rabbi, the Board of Deputies or the *Jewish Chronicle* are 'our' representatives. In each of their different ways they do of course represent many Jews, quite possibly most Jews, but not all Jews. Jews don't have a Pope or an Archbishop of Canterbury. According to the Board of Deputies' own website – strapline 'The voice of the UK Jewish Community' – half the Jews in this country are not affiliated with a synagogue.

So, when surveys announce that, say, 85% of Jews believe such-and-such, I think it's fair to ask questions about how the views of the seemingly secular 50% of Jews have been canvassed. How do they find us? How do they know, once a sufficient number have been found for the poll, that this represents the views of other secular Jews? Once again, quite clearly there is no Jewish pope for secular Jews. Secular Jews are by no means a homogeneous, monolithic group with the same opinions. Opinion polls have been used, rather, to control messaging around what are so-called Jewish views – which raises questions that lead back into questions of Jewish identity. The message handed out around repeated media coverage of these opinion surveys has been, in effect, that 'good Jews' or 'real Jews' believe what the majority believe.

Among Jews in the UK, there is a totally justified pride in Judaism and in the Jewish people having survived vilification, persecution and genocide. Among many, probably most Jews, there is an equally strong pride in Israel and Zionism. For many, these are the 'defining characteristics' of being Jewish. And for some, this is the beginning and end of the argument, because if you're neither religious nor Zionist, well then, you're not really Jewish. But if you're still claiming to be Jewish, you're deluded, or untruthful and hypocritical, or in some way a danger to Jews. In the febrile world of Twitter, being such a person invites you to be called out over and over as 'vile', 'rancid' or 'repugnant', and that by definition you shouldn't be allowed to work for the BBC or, for example, an anti-racist charity.

So, in this context, as I look inward to myself, back into history and out towards society, what do I find about my Jewish identity beyond the politics, as part of a multicultural Britain? Again, starting from my parents, our household was full of debate, argument and what I might call a 'porous' attitude to culture. They were both teachers and made it their specialism to teach, analyse and write about language and literature. Our lives were full of this stuff! At one level, there was nothing Judaic or Jewish about this. Quite the opposite, in that their attitude was precisely diverse, multicultural, internationalist and non-tribal. My parents revelled in 'foreign' literatures and languages. Yet into this mix they slotted in a fascination with – and pride in – Jewish authors and critics: Salinger, Roth, Heller, Steiner, Babel, Kafka, Freud and, of course, Marx (Trotsky – not!). My father would muse over the presence in English literature of Jews who were '*hoyke fenster*' (Yiddish: literally, 'big windows' or 'posh') such as Siegfried Sassoon or Leonard Woolf, alongside the blatant antisemitism of people like T.S. Eliot. They both loved Shakespeare and Dickens and frequently discussed the Shylock-Fagin question – both problematic portraits of Jews. As lovers of art, theatre and film they would both do that thing of 'spotting'

artists, actors, directors who were Jewish and pointing this out to us: Chagall, Alfie Bass, Tom Stoppard, and so on. They gave off a signal that they felt some affinity with such people without ever explaining why or how.

As I've said, at one level there isn't anything particularly Jewish about any of this. At another, it's possible to detect some things that are, but to identify them – as I shall – is not to reduce them to being 'essentially Jewish' attributes. I can see two tendencies in my parents which now seem to me very particular and certainly marked us out as different from many of our non-Jewish friends: an obsession with debate and argument; an instinct for and attraction to storytelling of all kinds. Had they inherited and adapted what some regard as the two branches of Jewish intellectual life – the halachic and aggadic – the legalistic and the storytelling? Has this informed my life, too?

Another strand to this that fed into and out of these endless debates, improvisations, narratives and performances was a more popular stream. Both my parents came from Yiddish-speaking backgrounds; my father's grandfather was a key figure in his childhood and a Yiddish speaker, while my mother told us that her first language was Yiddish. In our house, Yiddish was a form of labelling, naming and typifying: objects, parts of the body, attitudes, types of people, and states of mind would be described with Yiddish words and phrases. There remained for them (and me) a strong attachment to the foods of their childhoods, a larder of Yiddish words.

Neither of them attended any religious or social organisations which had the word 'Jewish' attached to them, although I did. For a while, a school friend recruited me for a local 'cheder' (Hebrew classes) and at secondary school I decided to attend the Jewish assembly (run by the maths teacher!).

At my first secondary school, I can see on reflection that I hung about in a milieu that was full of Jewish kids, so that when I went to the next secondary school where there were none apart from me, I heard for the first time some antisemitic jibes directed at me – as opposed to ones that my parents had reported directed at them. In the world of ex-Communists (yes, there was a micro-world of these) in the late fifties and sixties, I met with people in the 'New Left', plenty of whom were Jewish in background and had roots in anarchism, Trotskyism, Bundism, South African activism, Holocaust survivor advocacy. As I started my writing career, the first complete piece that I wrote – a play called *Backbone*, put on at the Royal Court Theatre – turned out to be in part about English suburban antisemitism.

If I break here in this narrative, I can see that what I've described so far is that sense of self that sits in us and with us, no matter what happens in later life. By that I mean that even if we reject how we lived for the first 20 years of our lives, it's still in us and even affects how we reject it. In my case, though, I didn't reject it. I swung with it and adapted it, and was lucky to go on debating and arguing, laughing and crying with my father till 2008. My mother, sadly, died in 1976 and I never got to fully understand her attitudes, sometimes contradictory, to her background.

In looking at my adult life, I can, if I choose, look through a prism of Jewishness. This involves picking – out of the stream of stuff that I do – things that have the word 'Jewish' specifically attached to them. Naturally enough, there is an old Jewish joke attached to this kind of obsessive introspection. (Did I mention jokes earlier? No, I don't think I did. My father was obsessed with Jewish jokes. He collected them, told them, talked about them. How could I forget?) So, the joke – this is an evening class in the 1930s at a time when the 'Jewish Problem' or the 'Jewish Question'

was openly discussed. The teacher sets the class homework to write an essay on 'The Elephant'. Next session, the teacher asks the students what they've written. The French student has written about 'The Elephant and its love habits'. The English student has written about 'The Elephant and its muscular-skeletal engineering', and the Jewish student has written about 'The Elephant and the Jewish Question'. While you recover from the joke, let it not be forgotten that the Nazis soon came up with an *Endlösung der Judenfrage*, or as we know it, the Final Solution (to the Jewish Question).

So, here's a list – yes, I'm going to reduce myself to a list – to answer for myself what I do that is specifically to do with Jewish matters. I joined in a collective (that included Holocaust survivor Rabbi Hugo Gryn) to write a pamphlet on the topic of 'Holocaust Denial'. I have regularly written poems that include the Yiddish words of my childhood, and I perform these in hundreds of schools and on my YouTube channel, teaching the words to thousands of children. I do this in imitation of and inspired by my Caribbean colleagues in the children's poetry world who I've performed with, as they teach children Caribbean expressions and words as an integral part of taking pride in their background and culture. I regularly take part in the activities of Jewish cultural organisations, such as Jewish Book Week, Jewish Renaissance, JW3, the Jewish Museum and the Wiener Holocaust Library. I've made radio programmes about such things as how we memorialise the Holocaust and have taken part in discussions about Yiddish. Over the last 20 years or more I've researched my father's family's fate during the Holocaust and published two books about it, whilst doing workshops on the Holocaust for thousands of children and young people as part of the work done by HistoryWorks. I've done a promotion for Yad Vashem UK, worked with a local 'Chavurah' (communal gathering), and I'm down to do a session for Jewish Care.

What does this add up to? What does it mean? What does it reflect about who I am, what I do and how I express myself through writing and performing? In a formal sense, it's an ethnicity check list! Some of my MA students investigate how children's books do, or don't affirm children's identity. I often ask them to go back to government and sociological descriptions and definitions of ethnicity. They begin their assignments by delineating what constitutes ethnicity: language, dialect, religion, food, clothes, music, dance, painting, literature(s) and so on. We discuss the difference between multiculturalism and interculturalism. In these discussions I find myself musing about how my parents and I have always mixed things up, always brought in and given out a mix of cultures. In fact, one of the antisemitic tropes of our time is to accuse Jews of doing this – Jews are somehow active participants or agents in the 'replacement' or dilution of white culture (whatever that is) by 'others' – usually meant in their minds to be people of colour, but Jews will do.

All of which takes me back to those who imagine that they or we are under threat from an Islamo-fascist take-over. Not being prepared to accept this view of the world means – in the cases of Corbyn or Miliband – that you are unfit to be Prime Minister and that you are an 'existential threat' to Jews. With a great deal of smugness, the people who argued this have declared victory. Corbyn and the Labour Party have been defeated. The (unproven) existential threat has been lifted. Apparently.

I see it differently. As I have tried to describe, I come from traditions that mix socialism, humanism, interculturalism and Marxism, along with specific attachments to aspects of Jewish culture. How does that feel right now in a Corbyn-free society? Someone, Boris Johnson, with a clear antisemitic strain in his journalism, leads a party in government that has been persecuting migrants, asylum seekers and people with supposedly

indeterminate British nationality through promoting a 'hostile environment', to the horrific 'Windrush scandal', and beyond.

In February and March 2020, at the start of the Covid pandemic, this same UK government and some of its scientific advisers entertained in all seriousness ideas around 'herd immunity without vaccination'. The consequence of this do-nothing approach to a lethal virus was death and injury to tens of thousands of us. Targeted knowingly or by default were the old, the vulnerable and those with 'underlying health conditions'. How should we describe this? Eugenicist? Democidal? For me and thousands of others there has been no existential threat as great as this since World War Two. The virus took root in the UK thanks to lack of quarantine, lack of test, trace and isolate, and the continuation of large scale international public events such as the Cheltenham Festival, football matches and concerts. I wonder how many older Jewish people were scared into believing that the Labour Party was a danger to them, voted Tory and have been debilitated by Covid.

I've done all I can to identify this. At one level, I don't do this as a Jew. I do it as a human being. But then, when I do the kind of introspection I've done here, I can see that there is a way in which I can do my version of 'The Elephant and the Jewish Question'. As a Jew, I can see that the sensibilities, politics and cultural outlook I have inherited and adapted inform how and why I am so angry about what this government has and has not done in relation to Covid-19. Yes, I do feel that this alerts me to murderous, democidal tendencies, just as I feel acutely aware of how this government deals with migration and asylum and most recently, as I write this, with questions around flags, national identity and history – exemplified by the so-called 'culture war' against 'wokeness'.

At the very moment of signing off this article, it appears this culture war has gone wrong. Government ministers who thought that they were on to something which could help them maintain power and control have slipped up. They judged the mood of those going to football matches as disapproving of 'taking the knee' to protest racism. They heard a few boos, amplified them in their heads and refused to make disapproving statements. They implied or stated that 'taking the knee' wasn't appropriate, that it was 'gesture politics'. They failed to notice that they were delivering judgements on a gesture that began its life with African Americans. The England football team did very well – the first England men's team to reach a final of an international tournament since 1966. But they lost. A foul set of messages on social media was directed at some of the black players who were deemed to have made mistakes. At this point, the mini-culture war that the government itself had unleashed rebounded against them, in the face of this horrible display of racism towards players that many people in the country regard as heroes.

There are other indicators of a continuing government-inspired 'culture war'. A colleague of mine at Goldsmiths, University of London, is an expert on the history and present generations of London Bengalis. As many of the earliest Bengali settlers in London were connected to work in shipping, it was appropriate that he had an advisory role at the National Maritime Museum, as a Trustee of Royal Museums Greenwich. However, when it came for his contract to be renewed, Oliver Dowden, then Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, blocked it. A senior member of the Board resigned in protest. Following this, we had the absurd spectacle of Mr Dowden approving a kind of second national anthem to be sung (supposedly) by all British school children on a given date. It all kicked off rather badly as Scottish children were already on holiday and the Welsh authorities said that it wasn't for them. So not all British children, then.

Even so, it's the effort that's worth remarking on – a specific attempt to 'ramp up' patriotism. This involves the usual inflation of 'Great', which just meant 'big Britain', into meaning wonderful and the best; but this also goes with false claims about togetherness, tolerance and openness. In word and deed, the government has undermined togetherness and tolerance (e.g. Windrush, lies about 'illegal' asylum seekers, their muddle over 'taking the knee'). As for openness – their theme tune is controlling immigration, something they've been doing since the 1905 Aliens Act, the chief aim of which was to control Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. That's what immigration acts are for. Nostalgia surrounding the Kindertransport, which gave asylum to Jewish children in the Second World War, belies the fact that very few of the children saw their parents or older siblings again. They weren't welcome.

The government, then, is trying a difficult juggling act: on the one hand playing its Brexit card, asserting that the island of Britain [sic] would be safe from anyone and everyone trying to get in; whilst on the other producing a stream of self-congratulation about how tolerant and welcoming they or we are. People have noticed that this sounds hypocritical coming from a Prime Minister who has ridiculed the ethnicity of minorities and is not above giving space and a home to racist and antisemitic ideas, as his own journalism, fiction, and time as editor at the *Spectator* demonstrate.

The theory behind all this is that people vote with their hearts not with their heads. They vote for cultural and touchy-feely reasons. It's no use pointing out to former 'Red Wall' voters that their local Labour council is not responsible for funding hospitals, local bus services or social care. If people have decided that the Labour leadership in Westminster is full of middle-class Londoners, then that's a big part of the problem. The irony is that the Conservative leadership in Westminster is full of upper-class Londoners

instead. If this is right, then we can be sure that this government will go on waging the 'culture wars' even if they have so spectacularly failed to control the agenda around 'taking the knee'.

I find myself thinking about all these attempts to 'massify' Jews into one homogeneous group. Paradoxically, this lumping together comes from both antisemites and some prominent Jewish groups. Antisemitism thrives on talking about 'the Jews' and attaching well-known sets of stereotypes and evil characteristics to the phrase. Having identified a world conspiracy encompassing both capitalists and Bolsheviks, philistines and 'cultural Marxists', millionaires and beggars, the Nazis didn't need to be nuanced about what they meant by 'the Jews'.

And yet, as we have seen, many opinion polls talk of the thoughts and attitudes of 'the Jews', or the 'Jewish community', as if there is only one, and as if that settles the matter. To give an example, there is the constant assertion in much of the mainstream media, as well as by politicians of different hues, that Israel is the 'Jewish homeland' – that is, the home for all Jews, whether we like it or not. There is a terrible irony in the fact that one highly prominent group of non-Jews agrees with this – those Christian evangelists who would like us to all go to Israel to precipitate the Second Coming, at which point we will all undergo a miraculous conversion ... or be put to the sword. Telling 'the Jews' where we ought to go, and giving us the generous choice of conversion or execution, carries more than a suggestion of antisemitism about it, but strange as it may seem, there are some Jews who welcome this kind of 'support'.

So, if looking at 'the Jews' from an antisemitic perspective both massifies and homogenises us, looking at the matter as a Jew (or my kind of Jew), I see a diversity so variegated as to be beyond description in a few words.

This shouldn't even need saying but does, as and when it's antisemitism that forces the hand of Jews who so desperately wish to massify and homogenise us. The reasons for the diversity are themselves diverse (!), but one key aspect is the sheer geographical spread of Jews around the globe, a vast patchwork of varied backgrounds, cultures and classes. You don't have to be a determinist to see that the historical effect of such a spread is bound to have massively influenced who Jews have become in their differences.

I'm fine with the idea that most religious Jews take great comfort from the fact that Judaism has been around for so long, and that the sacred words, forms of worship and festivals have been so constant. That's great. But there are many other traditions, too: secular, radical dissent from Spinoza to Marx, Walter Benjamin, Rosa Luxemburg, Sigmund Freud, Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida and so many more, including great non-Judaic artistic expression from Kafka, Isaac Babel, Stefan Zweig, Gertrude Stein, Lenny Bruce, Muriel Spark, Tom Lehrer, Mel Brooks and many more, too. There's no need for any of us to be in the least reticent about this.

I'll put it more provocatively: I see these multi-cultural voices as a Jewish homeland.

Michael Rosen

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A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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