EDITOR’S NOTE

REFLECTIONS ON BRITISH JEWRY

All articles and book reviews in this, the fifty-third volume of The Jewish Journal of Sociology relate to Anglo-Jewry. While volumes such as this are usually brought together as themed editions, this collection has arisen serendipitously and may be regarded as coming at an important juncture in the annals of the Anglo-Jewish population. It encompasses demography, history, geographical distribution and identity, and touches on communal sectarianism and leadership. The papers employ qualitative and quantitative approaches and balance current demography with historical; an in-depth examination of youth leaders’ attitudes to intra-communal cohesion is counterbalanced by statistical measurement of demographic sub-groups. The books reviewed consider parallel issues and, from different disciplines, highlight Anglo-Jewish causes célèbres of the last two decades. Such consensus on important issues may seem unsurprising within a small, conservative, minority community but is nevertheless remarkable because these events become key, perhaps iconic, markers in the interpretation and analysis of communal development.

There is an important distinction between Jewish population and Jewish community. This affects research design and informs any institution’s mature understanding of reports and data. In today’s world it should be taken for granted that many Jews, however we choose to define them, neither join community membership groups and institutions nor involve themselves in formal communal activity. Indeed, for a large number, informal family occasions may be their only link with Judaism or Jewish life. As both community surveys and official statistics have become more reliable, communal institutions have regularly asked whether this fall-off in affiliation and activity is the outcome of demographic trends such as ageing or out-marriage or even the result of high educational attainment among younger Jewish women. These are recurring questions for social scientists and the responses feed into community policy and custom. The religion question in the 2001 British decennial censuses fuelled this process and the censuses of March 2011 repeated...
the question. Graham’s insightful article shows the wealth of information about population development that came from the original question in 2001 and which points to multiple Jewish identities. Even with caveats about response rates to the question and the definition of ‘Jewish’, the 2011 question will provide comparisons to strengthen our understanding of socio-demographic trends and the accompanying community changes in Anglo-Jewry over the last decade.

Certain changes are approaching at an institutional level, also, although it is too early to define them clearly. In 2012 the United Hebrew Congregations in Britain will decide upon a successor to Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks and the person selected will take up office in 2013. Stephen Pack, newly elected president of the United Synagogue, plans to set up two selection panels, aiming for an agreed appointee by Rosh Hashanah 2012. The *Jewish Chronicle* launched a campaign on ‘The Future of the Chief Rabbinate’ with a leader stating ‘It is the 21st century, and time to elect our leader’ and articles headlined ‘Time for the Jew in the pew to ask searching questions’ and ‘Who will pick the new Chief Rabbi’. Subsequent readers’ correspondence shows that private dinner-table speculation had moved into the public domain. Unsurprisingly there is some scepticism as to whether anything will indeed change.

These discussions are not confined to United Synagogue members. The interested Jew in the street can come from any sector and, whether or not s/he recognises his authority, can finely gauge the role that a Chief Rabbi plays within British Jewry and have opinions about election procedures, patterns of leadership and the like.

What makes this particular change of incumbent a possible historic turning point rather than a straightforward succession? The Chief Rabbi is spiritual head of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, which in the UK means the 60 or so constituents of the London-based United Synagogue and over 50 other regional mainstream orthodox congregations. Analyses of British synagogue membership show that he is the constitutional Chief Rabbi of 55 per cent of all synagogue-affiliated households. When Jewish population could more firmly be equated with Jewish community and when that community was more orthodox, the Chief Rabbi was regarded as ex-officio spokesman for all Jews in Britain. For more than 15 years both haredim and Progressives have challenged this position. Haredim have developed discrete links to government and Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner was recently appointed to act as the Movement for Reform Judaism’s official ‘voice’ on religious issues. On 21 July 2011 the Jewish Chronicle featured an interview with her entitled: ‘Why I’m not the Reform rival to the Chief Rabbi’ where she explained that the United Synagogue should not feel threatened. Notably she speaks from a Reform perspective on the BBC’s daily radio news programme ‘Today’, to which Lord Sacks regularly contributes. Indeed, his Thoughts For The Day are a major source of his
national following and of the widespread acceptance among non-Jews that he speaks for the whole Jewish population. How long will it take any successor to come out of this shadow and how will he respond to the increased confidence among other strands in the Jewish spectrum?

The then-Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks was welcomed as a harbinger of change and modernisation particularly when he sponsored the 1994 Review Women In The Community. Since then, he has been frequently criticised as ‘looking over his right shoulder’ and mainstream Jewish women lament his lack of action. Will a new Chief Rabbi avoid these pitfalls and develop more cohesion across both community and population? Will he take account of the attitudes and experiences of youth leaders as described by Abramson and draw on them to improve cross-denomination dialogue? In what ways will the changing balance of numbers influence how haredi, mainstream and progressive strands relate to each other? Given the different age-structures of the haredi and non-haredi, will haredi numbers grow so as at least to equal the non-haredi during the next Chief Rabbi’s tenure, with all that may mean in relations with government or for social welfare requirements and provision? And will women come to participate adequately at all levels of orthodox synagogue leadership and thus set an example to the male-biased leaderships of other central and secular communal organisations? Action in response to any of these questions implies communal change.

Laidlaw and Graham present historical and contemporary aspects of demography. Both the historical database and the 2001 census portray established communities. The 1851 Anglo-Jewish Database provides a snapshot of a population that had been in Britain for two centuries prior to the mass immigration of the late 19th century. Jews were then a small minority; at approximately 29,000, they comprised one-tenth of one percent of the England and Wales population. Census statistics for 2001 show a population ten times larger than that of 1851 yet still only half a per cent of the total population. Sporadic studies by individual scholars from the 1890s until the 1960s gave some insight into the social development and growth of twentieth century British Jewry following the pre-World War I influx. Prompted by a conference in 1962, the Board of Deputies of British Jews set up a Statistical and Demographic Research Unit in 1965 which regularly provided indirect estimates of population and undertook identity and local community studies. For some eight years the Unit lobbied the Office for National Statistics (ONS) strongly for the 2001 religion question. With the establishment of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in 1996 British Jewish research extended further to national, planning-oriented studies.

Communal organisations have commissioned, sought and used social research. As indicated above, since the 1960s there have been community-employed researchers advised by research boards made up of experienced academics. At the timing of writing, this professional
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staffing has now been reduced so that there are currently no full-time community researchers although one-off studies are being planned.\(^6\) The annual compilation of basic demographic statistics, which tracked denominational trends, has slowed down and no report has been issued since 2007. While in-house research is clearly not the only model, the community is no longer training any specialist researchers. The appearance of the census religion question may have led to complacency or engendered a sense that the community could rely on government statistics. However, firm statements are now emerging from government to the effect that the 2011 decennial census will be the last. An email circulated\(^7\) by the Office of National Statistics to census users read ‘You may be aware that the UK Statistics Authority has stated that the 2011 Census is likely to be the last of its kind in the UK. The ‘Beyond 2011’ Programme has been established by the Office for National Statistics to take a fresh look at different approaches that will meet future user needs as an alternative to running a Census in 2021’. It explains that this has the potential to change the way socio-demographic statistics are produced for decades to come.

British Jewish communal statistics providers and users must be involved in the planned consultation. Religion is not currently recorded on birth, marriage or death certificates and the number of Jews in national sample surveys is always too small to be of any value. The upshot of this is that Anglo-Jewry could be forced to revert to using statistical methods for which there was no alternative in the pre-digital age but which do not meet the requirements of modern society.

The change in the official approach to the collection and dissemination of core population data should be a wake-up call and taken as an opportunity to ensure that official statistics encompass communal needs. At the same time, the research skills so carefully built up in the last half-century must not be allowed to seep from the community. If they do, British Jewry may find that rather than drawing on evidence it will revert to a very dangerous free-for-all based on poorly informed guesses.

Marlena Schmool
Acting Editor, 2009 to 2011.

NOTES

\(^1\) The articles and reviews relate mainly to England and so the term Anglo-Jewry has here been preferred over British Jewry, except where Scotland is also covered.

\(^2\) The term used here has been chosen from the many available for inter-group marriage to indicate marriage away from regular Jewish involvement and activity. ‘Intermarriage’ or ‘mixed marriage’ do not have this resonance.
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3 That is in England and Wales, and Scotland. Northern Ireland has regularly included such a question.
4 The Jewish Chronicle, No 7425, 12/8/2011
5 ibid.
6 See for example Alderman, G., An Elected Chief Rabbi? If only in The Jewish Chronicle, Number 7429, 9/11/2011
7 Approximately 70 per cent of Jewish households have synagogue membership. Households vary widely in size and it is difficult to estimate an exact number of people covered by this statistic. For full details see D Graham and D Vulkan, (2010), Synagogue Membership in the United Kingdom in 2010, London JPR (Available on www.bod.org.uk)
8 The Jewish Chronicle, No 7422, 21/07/2011
9 Rabbi Lionel Blue has also done so for decades without any partisan labelling and no suggestion of rivalry has ever been reported.
10 Title of the religion slot in the programme
11 Aleksander, T (2009), Connection, Continuity and Community: British Jewish Women Speak Out (London: Women’s Review Task Force)
12 Except to some extent on the issue of agunot (chained wives)
14 Which became the Community Research Unit in 1986.
15 As protagonists in an ONS Interfaith Census Religion Question Working Group.
16 For example, there are difficulties in finding a project leader for a Jewish Leadership Council-backed study of Women and Leadership in Major Organisations.
17 On 16th September 2011