

BEN JUDAH

The Mistake British Jews Made

*Anglo Jewry should be leading the call
for a nonsectarian Britain*



ETWEEN July 2024 and September 2025, I served as the special adviser to the British foreign secretary. In the Italianate grandeur of King Charles Street, as the headquarters of British diplomacy is known, I worked under a gigantic portrait of Sir Henry Pottinger, the now vanished empire's first governor of Hong Kong, in the rooms known as the Foreign Secretary's Private Office. My days were mostly spent at the side of the Labour government's secretary of state, David Lammy. When not with him, I was consulting with diplomats on his behalf or fielding calls from journalists and political advisers across Whitehall. Sometimes I would take meetings in the Ambassadors' Waiting Room, where, beneath an absurdly high ceiling, Lord Walter

Rothschild once waited to meet with Lord Arthur Balfour in 1917.

My work for the British government frequently brought me into contact with representatives of the Jewish community. Now out of government, and in the shadow of one of the first antisemitic murders of Jews on British soil since their formal readmission to England in 1656, I have spent time reflecting on why organized Anglo Jewry has proved relatively ineffective in its efforts to influence my country's recent politics. And I've come up with a general diagnosis: In attempting to compete in unwinnable identity politics, British Jewry has lost the art of appealing to the national interest. By often prioritizing speaking for Israel over their own more immediate local needs, British Jews have failed to grasp where their real influence lies: in championing a nonsectarian Britain as it struggles with Islamism, populism, and migration.



We British Jews would do well to reacquaint ourselves with the Rothschilds' approach. In the Rothschild family archives lives a letter that Baron Lionel Nathan de Rothschild, Walter's grandfather, wrote in 1852 during his long campaign to sit in the House of Commons as a Jew without having to swear an oath "on the true faith of the Christian." The words *Jew* or *Jewish* do not appear in this letter. "Elected originally to vindicate the great principle of religious liberty," wrote Baron Lionel, "re-elected in order to prove that the citizens of London had not deserted that principle, I believe that on my success on the present occasion the final triumph of our cause depends." As the leader of the campaign for Jewish political rights, he and his fellow Jewish campaigners and political pioneers were scrupulous to always frame his cause as not Jewish but British, a national project in the interests of all countrymen of free-thinking conscience. The

argument was simple enough: Allowing Jews to participate in British politics as Jews was good for Britain. It was a British project.

The same tenor can be found in the campaign that led to the Balfour Declaration, a campaign in which Lord Walter Rothschild was so pivotal and for which he scrupulously argued, presenting it as in the national interest of His Majesty's Government. "I tried to make it clear to him," said the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann of meeting Balfour's soon-to-be deputy, Lord Cecil, in 1915, "that it would be good not only for us but for England." This was not simply the language that Lord Rothschild and Weizmann used in private conversation in the Foreign Office but a script common to all Zionist advocates across the country. A group of Manchester campaigners wrote that the movement's British Palestine Committee was launched to propagate "this absolute identity of interest between British policy and Jewish national aspirations." The BPC's journal argued that "a British Palestine will be a source of strength to the empire and a benefit to the whole world."

There was a reason the Anglo-Jewish leadership spoke like this during the First World War. As is the case today, the Jewish community was "an embattled minority," to quote the historian David Cesarani. Some British Jews at that time misunderstood the politics of what was about to happen, and their error very nearly cost the Jewish community grave harm. As late as July 31, 1914, the *Jewish Chronicle*, the voice of British Jewry and affectionately known as the *JC*, fumed at the "wicked" idea of "spilling blood or the squandering of British resources in order that the Slavs may maintain their position against the Teutons and an effete and barbarous autocracy be sustained on a tottering throne." Even a Rothschild, Lord Nathaniel (the son of Lionel the emancipator and the father of Walter the Zionist), claiming to speak for the City of London, made a late appeal to the government for peace talks with Germany and asked *The Times*

to moderate its coverage. Making matters worse, this became publicly known only after the Kaiser had already invaded Belgium and turned the nation decisively for war. “A dirty German-Jewish international financial attempt to bully us into advocating neutrality”: That’s how *The Times* foreign news editor denounced the man who personified the Jewish community, painting him as representing foreign interests.

It was only by reversing course that the Jewish community was able to turn matters around. As crowds rejoiced in the streets about Britain proclaiming war against Germany, the *JC* hung a banner outside its offices that read, “England has been all she could be to Jews. Jews will be all they can be for England.” This fierce identification with the nation’s chosen policy would become something of a motto. Now guided by the Rothschilds and the grand Jewish families in West London, once fondly known as “the Cousinhood,” the Jewish masses in East London navigated moments that could have turned very ugly, from an antisemitic mob smashing up Jewish shops in the East End in 1917 to accusations that noncitizen Russian Jews were evading the war effort. The prelude to what the *JC* called “a Jewish triumph” of the Balfour Declaration was an intense display of patriotism and loyalty, with British Jews serving at higher rates than the general population. This was the backdrop when a Jewish National Home in Palestine was proposed as a project to strengthen the British Empire; it was a main reason that proposal fell on warm ears in Balfour’s Foreign Office.



I can’t help but contrast this history with my own experience hosting members of the British Jewish community at the Foreign Office or in Number 10 Downing Street. Over and over again, the

leaders of my community devoted their time with this precious audience to pushing against policies where they knew they would have no purchase, such as our decision to follow France and recognize the State of Palestine. Arguing for the reversal of an already chosen foreign policy, and with virtually no domestic support outside the Jewish community, struck me as a self-evidently futile misuse of community resources. It was as if they were channeling the spirit of the wrong Rothschild: Nathaniel, in 1914, clumsily championing a foreign policy that was out of step with both government and society. That there would be no backtracking on the government's recognition of Palestine was presumably clear to all present, as was the fact that we had already heard the counterarguments from Israel's own official ambassadors and representatives. Why did British Jewish leaders devote their energy to duplicating the already failed efforts of the Israeli Embassy? I was constantly frustrated that the community's representatives were seemingly blind to where they could have real influence in our increasingly fractured society: by becoming *the* community promoting a truly nonsectarian vision for a rapidly transforming Britain.

In the wake of numerous antisemitic attacks committed by jihadist British nationals, it has become clear that anti-Jewish violence is a symptom of British non-integration. Demographically and culturally, Britain is a very different country from what it was in my youth. In 1991, the foreign-born population was 7 percent of the country. By 2021, it had reached 16 percent. In London, where most of Britain's Jews live, the demographic shift has been even more dramatic. In 1991, the foreign-born population was around 20 percent; today it is 41 percent. Across Britain, ethnic ghettoization, Islamic radicalism, sectarianism, and white counter-mobilization are all familiar and constant problems. In Lionel Rothschild's time, the Jews Relief Act 1858 addressed the rather narrow ques-

tion of religious and political integration for Britain's only sizable non-Christian minority: Jews. But the more than 1 million British Hindus and nearly 4 million British Muslims make today's political landscape and urgencies very different. In the new Britain, there is a yawning gap where integration should be.

This—a failed Britain, not a failed British foreign policy—is the real threat to British Jews. And it is in its commitment to the promise of British liberalism that British Jewry—a community unwanted for centuries but that made Britain better for everyone—has great credibility and influence. To make the most of this influence means taking a leaf out of Baron Lionel Rothschild's emancipation playbook. Sure, it was a different time, but every era has its upheavals. Then an industrial revolution, now an information revolution. Then mass urbanization, now mass immigration. Now as then, all Britons feel the fabric of our lives and cities being transformed. Now as then, the Jews have something to say about it.

From Baron Lionel with emancipation, to Lord Walter with Balfour, the Rothschilds exhibited a detectable pattern in British Jewish history. Anglo Jewry has been at its most influential in the 19th and 20th centuries, when it has promoted projects self-evidently in the full national interest. Alas, this once obvious point has been obscured and muddled in the 21st century by the proliferation of identity politics, a contemptuous arena of competitive victimhood in which some British Jews have misguidedly thought they could win by using emotional language and accusations of double standards, often accompanied by a threat (rather than a patriotic affirmation) that Jews will leave Britain.

Much like attempts to direct British foreign policy in the Middle East, this play at identity politics is failing badly. Despite huge efforts, through endless newspaper columns and in excellent bestselling books such as David Baddiel's *Jews Don't Count*, the community has not been readmitted to the radical Left's hierarchy

of victimhood. Despite immense efforts to call out antisemitism and liken it to other forms of racism, now a daily online ritual for many, antisemitism has only proliferated.

British Jewry needs a new strategy. Rather than indulging the indignities of the present, it must learn the lessons of the past. Emancipation strengthened Britain through free thinking, and standing up to sectarianism and proposing a new progressive but assertive model of integration would do the same. It is on these questions that British Jews can make a difference—as British citizens with ideas for what needs to be done to ensure and secure a nonsectarian Britain.

So here are some ideas from a British Jew committed to a nonsectarian Britain. I've seen the proliferation of sectarianism firsthand through political engagement with the leaders of various ethnoreligious communities. Many of these leaders, whether Muslim, Jewish, or of some other faith, receive their religious training abroad, which means that they bring home with them the sectarian lessons of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Israel, and elsewhere. As far as I can tell, this has been far from helpful in soothing the ethnoreligious tensions in Britain's increasingly multicultural society.

As a first step toward stemming this foreign influence in Britain's ethnoreligious communities, the Jewish community should be out front in urging for a review of the social threats of sectarianism, the foreign funding of religious institutions, the training abroad of religious leadership, and the ethos of the growing number of religious schools at home. Such a review would investigate what attitudes toward British multiculturalism are being taught to the next generation by religious leaders and institutions. For one thing, all foreign-trained clergy should undergo mandatory further training in the U.K. that stresses the promotion of British tolerance and nonsectarianism. As it stands, there is no barrier to foreign states paying salaries to religious leaders in Britain, which Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Ara-

bia, and others all do. It is right to ask whether this should be allowed to continue. In addition, the British government could link its funding for the multiplying number of religious schools to far stronger promotion of British values. This is about not only Islamic sectarianism but wider integration. These rules would also apply to all religions in the country. Quite a few Haredi Jewish institutions, I expect, would rightly be required to adapt as well. The review would also consider whether the registration of a place of worship or the granting of charitable status to a religious institution should come with additional regulatory oversight.

A campaign for something like this would bolster and be bolstered by Britain's ethnic and religious leaders who share a commitment to British nonsectarianism and security. Working in politics quickly teaches you where you can have influence and where you do not. The recent government decision to ban and criminalize support for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and one of its affiliates was a very forceful example of how successful a Jewish-led, cross-community campaign can be. The Jewish community spearheaded this campaign, drawing attention to how the IRGC and the Islamic Movement of the Companions of the Right were targeting Iranian exiles on British soil and compromising British national security. This alliance was front and center in the campaign that tramped to the Foreign Office, through Parliament, and into Number 10. This provides a model for future advocacy in which the community can act as a valued leader, counsel, and defender of the society that most in Britain want to see.

We can learn from our mistakes as well. It's worth remembering that, at the time of the Balfour Declaration, it was Edwin Montagu, the only Jew in the cabinet, who opposed it and he did so on the grounds that it would lead to Jews "being treated as foreigners in

every country but Palestine.” Montagu should have had more faith in Britain, but thankfully this did not come to pass and the State of Israel did. But the creation of Israel means that it’s a country with its own interests. Its ambassadors and representatives stand up for these interests every day. Too much Jewish communal energy is spent hopelessly duplicating this work, to no good effect. This is not a new thing. Thirty years after the Balfour Declaration, David Ben-Gurion came to London to seek an extension of the British Mandate for fear that the Yishuv (the Jewish community in British Mandate Palestine) would imminently be overwhelmed by invading Arab forces; no British Jew could manage to arrange a meeting between him and the foreign secretary, let alone the prime minister. What Ben-Gurion wanted — for the British to remain in Palestine another five to ten years — was not seen by Clement Attlee or Ernest Bevin as in the British national interest. This was not a calculation that any Jewish community activism could alter.



But where the British national interest and the British Jewish interest clearly coincide is in the domestic sphere and in the goal of creating a less sectarian home country. What threatens Jews in Britain is what threatens the United Kingdom as a whole: the ability of Russia, Iran, or any hostile state to recruit disaffected minority youths to engage in terrorist activity on home soil. Imagine what that could do in a war. Ill winds for Jews are always the canary in the coal mine for ill tidings for all.

And this is where the Jewish community is well positioned to have a say. Abandoning futile identity politics and embracing the logic of the national interest and the language of pride and commitment to the United Kingdom should be the community’s answer to the internal

and external forces seeking to harm it. In our day, this means rising to the challenge of “England has been all she could be to Jews, Jews will be all they can be for England.” *

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