



70 Days for 70 Years

Remember the past to build the future

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How Cromwell gave us Joan Collins and other Luminaries

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Exactly 350 years ago, we began to be a multi-racial society. 1656 marked the return of Jews to England. They had been driven out by an edict of Edward I in 1290. In the intervening centuries - known as the Middle Period - Jews quite often came to this country on business, but they were not permitted to reside here or practise their religion. Their status, in fact, was that of Christians (and Jews) in Saudi Arabia today. In 1656, Cromwell let 300 of them return, and Jews have been here ever since.

Among the eventual consequences of this re-admission have been Benjamin Disraeli, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Yehudi Menuhin, Peter Sellers, Joan Collins, Arthur Koestler, Alan Sugar, Nigella Lawson, Lucien Freud, Tom Stoppard and Sid James. And why not add Max Perutz, Ali G, Ernst Chain, Jimmy Goldsmith, Miriam Rothschild, Melanie Klein, Alfred Brendel, Bernard Lewis, Emeric Pressburger, Harold Pinter, Sigmund Warburg, Keith Joseph, George Weidenfeld, Karl Popper, Ronald Harwood, Ernst Gombrich, Simon Schama, Jonathan Miller, Philip Green, Rachel Weisz and Robert Winston? Or Isaiah Berlin, Jacob Bronowski, Rosalind Franklin, Harold Abrahams, Alexander Korda, George Solti, Denis Norden, Muriel Spark, Siegfried Sassoon, Jacob Epstein, Daniel Day-Lewis, Nigel Lawson, Janet Reger, Marjorie Proops, Sam Mendes, Stirling Moss and Bernard Levin? It is even claimed that David Beckham, if not technically a Jew, is, as the old joke has it, Jew-ish. (And since into each life a little rain must fall, one might also note Michael Winner, Esther Rantzen, Eric Hobsbawm, Jerry Springer, Edwina Currie and Robert Maxwell on the debit side of the ledger.)

Anyone who has ever studied at a university, needed good doctors, shopped at Marks & Spencer or Tesco, benefited from scientific invention, listened to classical music, sought accountants or lawyers, watched a film, bought a book or needed his head examined, has gained from Cromwell's decision. The Jewish contribution is so great that it pervades almost all aspects of British society.

I have named individual Jews deliberately because, though it is always dangerous to generalise, even favourably, about race, it does seem to my gentile eyes that there is more prodigious ability8/1/2015 How Cromwell gave us Joan Collins and other luminaries - Telegraph <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3625765/How-Cromwell-gave-us-Joan-Collins-and-other-luminaries.html> 2/4 and energy per Jew than per the rest of us. The community here has never been enormous - at present, it is somewhere between 250,000 and 400,000 - but it has achievements out of proportion to its size. I like Herbert Samuel's claim that "The Jews are the same as everybody else, only more so".

But the interesting thing for British society today is to ask why such a people have been able to overcome prejudices that at first excluded them absolutely and later accepted them only on qualified terms (Jews could not sit in Parliament until the mid-19th century, for example). The answer could be useful for everyone.

The key, perhaps, is to be found in one of the earliest reports of Jews in England after their return. On October 14, 1663, Samuel Pepys found a way of visiting a synagogue in London (something very unusual for a Gentile at that time). In his diary, he described the service which he witnessed. He did not like it ("I never... could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this"), but he also noted that the Jews said a special prayer for the King. In other words, they accepted the civil power. The Jews did not do this just to save their skins by sucking up to Charles II: they did it because it was part of their religious duty. It still is. No believing Jew will obey a civil law that forces him to disobey his religious law - eat pork, for example. But if there is no conflict, his religion teaches him that he must obey the law of the land. In the Talmud, the question arises of whether you should pay taxes to a secular king. Yes, comes the answer, because "The law of the kingdom is the law". In the standard collection, called Ethics of the Fathers, which brings together rabbinical wisdom over the centuries, Jews are told: "Pray for the welfare of the government, for, without the fear of it, people will swallow one another alive." Even the most cursory study of Jewish life shows that it is full of disputes. There are splits between orthodox and reformed Jews, and within orthodoxy. There are thousands of secular Jews who feel very Jewish, but refuse to have their Jewishness defined by religion. There is ceaseless, often angry argument: when you read the Christian Gospels, you find that one of the most common scenes is of learned men quarrelling. That is still the case in Jewish culture. But because of this basic agreement among Jews about the status of the secular law, the effect of these quarrels on the wider society is minimal. It is significant that virtually no one reading this article will have heard of Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu. He is the chief justice of the Beth Din, the Chief Rabbi's court which adjudicates on the endless delicate points of Jewish law, often relating to diet or Sabbath observance, which come up within the community.

If Judaism were an aggressive religion, seeking to lay down its law for all mankind, then this 8/1/2015 How Cromwell gave us Joan Collins and other luminaries - Telegraph <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3625765/How-Cromwell-gave-us-Joan-Collins-and-other-luminaries.html> ¾ supremely learned old gentleman could acquire menacing power. Like the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran after 1979, Dayan Ehrentreu could tell people to kill in the name of God. Instead, his effect is the opposite. By policing so meticulously the difference between the precise duties of Jews and the duty to society at large, this scholar helps define the space necessary for people with beliefs quite at variance with those of the majority to live harmoniously among them. In this sense, people can be "fundamentalist" and yet perfectly at home in a society which is not.

For 2,000 years, Jews have developed a subtle understanding of the difference between the ideal society that would exist if God's laws prevailed everywhere and the world as it is. Without this understanding, people do indeed "swallow one another alive" and - one might add in the era of suicide bombings - swallow themselves in the process. With this understanding, a minority community can develop enough confidence and win enough acceptance to do good beyond the confines of itself. The Jewish concept of mitzvah, on which David Cameron dwelt when he made a speech celebrating the 350 years last week, means a good deed done for its own sake.

Such deeds are visible in the importance that Jews attach to charity and to education. British society needs a lot more mitzvahs. There is also the idea of "chesed", man's kindness to all men, as first shown by Abraham when he entertained angels unawares.

Thus does a potentially very closed community open itself out. The difference between majority and minority is very real - but not antagonistic.

In the past half-century, Muslims have come where the Jews came earlier, and in much larger numbers. Like such Jews, they have sometimes experienced the unhappiness that comes when one's religion is misunderstood or derided. Unlike the Jews, too many of their leaders tend to teach them that such slights must be avenged, that existence as a minority is just a temporary misfortune, not a state to be lived with, and that the law of England is virtually no law at all. If that attitude continues, society is reduced to a conflict about who will swallow whom alive. To avoid that is a huge and urgent task.