

Navigating the Shifting Sands of the British National Identity Mentality

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Introduction

I was born in the Southwest of Britain. My family origins are mixed: my mother's ancestors fled Eastern Europe in the 1800s, and my father and his family were Welsh. My mother's family was Jewish, but she was not brought up to identify herself as being Jewish, or practise Judaism. My father was brought up as a Catholic who later in life became an agnostic. Having discovered the Jewish side of my family in my late 20s, I took the necessary steps to be officially accepted and recognized by the relevant British Jewish authorities. This is the mixed and rich heritage through which I have navigated my sense of belonging as part of a minority community living in Britain.

In contemporary times, the Jewish community in Britain today has been mainly well accepted. But on occasions, Jews like other minority communities face varying levels of prejudice and mistrust, which on occasions manifest in extreme ways such as hate speech, damage to property, or physical acts of violence against individuals. Normally, these actions are instigated and carried out by far-right groups, sometimes supported by members of the general public. The fluctuating levels of acceptance of minority communities can also be affected by words spoken or written by public figures, social influencers, members of the political establishment, and government policy. In this short piece, I want to reflect on the ambivalent nature of the British national identity concept and mentality as regards minorities, and illustrate this ambivalence by referring to the racist and anti-immigration riots in the summer of 2024, and the significant rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia in Britain since October 2023. Finally, I briefly explore the response of Britain's Jewish community to the anti-immigration riots to provide an example of what faith communities can contribute to building respect and cohesion between all people in Britain

Shifting Sands of British National Identity Mentality

During 2024, hostility and violence towards minorities increased and was evidenced in two key examples. First, anti-immigration and racist riots occurred between 30th July and 7th August 2024. An estimated 29 riots occurred in 27 places across the UK. These riots were extremely violent, and saw members of far-right groups as well as members of the public, not affiliated to such groups, attacking hotels housing asylum seekers and refugees, immigration centres, offices of lawyers specializing in immigration, as well as Mosques, shops and other property owned by members of Britain's minority communities, in particular the Muslim community. These riots were triggered by misinformation spread on social media by far-right activists about the identity of the 17-year-old male suspect, who had carried out a knife attack killing three young girls, Bebe King aged 6, Elsie Dot Stancombe, aged 7, and Alice Dasilva Aguiar, aged 9, at a Taylor Swift dance class in Southport on 29th July. The far-right activists claimed that he was called 'Ali Al-Shakati', an asylum seeker who had recently come to the UK by boat. And from this misinformation, the racist and anti-immigration riots erupted onto the streets on a scale not seen in the UK for decades.

The truth about who the person suspected of committing the attack was released by Merseyside Police. He was Axel Mukanwa Rudakubana from Banks in Lancashire, born in Cardiff. Within a week of the riots, thousands of people across Britain took to the streets in non-violent protests in opposition to the hate and racist message of the organisers, advocates, supporters and participants of the riots, and to try and deter them from carrying out further violence. The messages they carried on placards included: ‘Refugees are Welcome Here’, ‘We Stand Against Racism’, and ‘Love and Unity’. The day after the riots in Southport, where the riots began, many local people, not specifically targeted by the rioters, spent time helping clear the debris from the streets, and helping to repair properties and homes that had been damaged.

Second, there is the ongoing Israel-Gaza war, which has led to a significant increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia towards Jews and Muslims living in Britain. The reality of the rise in Islamophobia across the UK was reported in early October 2024 by the national organization Tell Mama UK, established in 2012 to help and support those who experience Islamophobia. The report showed that between 7th October 2023 and 30th September 2024, 4,971 reports of anti-Muslim abuse were received, the highest total in any year during the past 14 years.¹ Likewise, The Jewish Community Security Trust (CST), who monitor antisemitic incidents, said they had received reports of 1,978 antisemitic incidents between January 1st and June 2nd, 2024, saying ‘This is an increase of 105% from the 964 antisemitic incidents recorded by CST in the January-to-June period of 2023’.² A further CST report covering the whole of the period from 7th October 2023 to the end of September 2024 revealed that just over 5,583 antisemitic incidents had taken place in the UK, ‘three times that of the previous 12-month period, which saw 1,830 incidents recorded in total’.³ This is the highest total in any year since CST was established in 1994.

The rise in antisemitism in Britain is widely thought to be the product of a mindset that mistakenly believes that all Jews agree with and support what the Israeli government is doing through its military action against the ordinary civilians in Gaza and its ongoing occupation of the West Bank.⁴ Similarly, the rise in Islamophobia unthinkingly equates all British Muslims as supporting Hamas and terrorism. There are urgent questions that need to be asked about what this hostility represents in terms of the British national identity mentality and associated British values. How is it possible for such levels of hostility and violence to be

¹ Neha Gohil, ‘Record Amount of Anti-Muslim Abuse Reported in the UK Since 7th October Attacks’, *The Guardian*, October 4, 2024.

² Community Security Trust, (2024), ‘Antisemitic Incidents Report January-June 2024’, (CST Publications, 2024). <https://cst.org.uk/research/cst-publications/antisemitic-incidents-report-january-june-2024> [accessed November 12, 2024].

³ Editor, ‘Antisemitism in UK Trebles in Year Since Hamas Attack on Israel’, *Jewish News*, October 2, 2024. <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/antisemitism-in-uk-trebles-in-year-since-hamas-attacks-on-israel/> [accessed November 15, 2024].

⁴ See: Wittenberg, Rabbi Jonathan, ‘A Statement on Rafah’, *Masorti Judaism News*, February 13, 2024. <https://masorti.org.uk/a-statement-on-rafah-by-senior-rabbi-jonathan-wittenberg/> [accessed March 18, 2025]; The Movement for Reform Judaism, ‘Statement from Progressive Jewish Clergy on Israel and Gaza’, Blog, February 20, 2024. <https://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/statement-from-progressive-jewish-clergy-on-israel-and-gaza/> [accessed March 18, 2025]; Rucker, Simon, ‘Chief Rabbi: Our Support for Israel Has to be Unequivocal’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 28, 2024. <https://www.thejc.com/community/chief-rabbi-our-support-for-israel-has-to-be-unequivocal-wjomkhzr> [accessed March 18, 2025].

whipped up against refugees, asylum seekers, and minority communities? How can anyone instigate or support hatred and violence against someone just because they are Jewish or Muslim?⁵

Some insights into these questions are found in various academic sources,⁶ independent surveys, and reports. From these sources we find that national identity is said to identify a specific community of people as a nation. There is a consensus that national identity consists of several major features. David Miller identifies the overarching of these ‘as a shared belief that its members belong together, and a shared wish to continue their life in common.’⁷ He identifies three other features. First, national identity ‘embodies historical continuity. Nations stretch backward into the past’; second, he describes national identity as ‘an active identity’ because ‘Nations are communities that do things together, take decisions, achieve results, and so forth’; third, national identity has a geographic dimension, ‘that it connects a group of people to a particular geographical place’.⁸

Contained within Miller’s perspective is a combination of the two general types of the concept of national identity: civic and ethnic. The ethnic concept of the nation and national identity emphasises a shared heritage, key elements of this are common ancestry, ethnicity, language, culture, and religion. The civic concept emphasises that anyone can become a member of a nation by identifying with and adhering to a certain set of shared values, showing respect for a country’s political institutions, and a commitment to a sense of shared citizenship. The ethnic concept promotes exclusivity, the civic concept promotes inclusivity. Within nation-states, there can be shifts between these two positions triggered by internal and external factors such as the level of national economic and political stability, threats, actual or perceived, to national security by internal or external factors, levels of immigration, or differing religious and cultural beliefs.

A brief overview of post-World War II Britain shows the country has not been immune from such shifts. In recent years, the ethnic concept of national identity has grown as evidenced in a 2013 independent report commissioned by the British government as part of its Foresight Project set up in 2003. The 2013 Report on the future of national identities in the UK was from a study carried out by Sundas Ali and Anthony Heath, scholars at the University of Oxford. Their conclusions included the following:

⁵ Fundamental British values are identified as ‘democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’. See UK Department of Education and Lord Nash, (2014), *Promoting Fundamental British Values as Part of SMSC in Schools*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a758c9540f0b6397f35f469/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf [accessed 10th October 2024]. p. 5.

⁶ See: Bikhu Parekh, (2002), ‘Politics of Identity – I: Being British’, *Government and Opposition*, 37(3) pp. 301 – 315; Victoria M Esses, Ulrich Wagner, Carina Wolf, Mathias Preiser and Christopher J. Wilburn, (2006), ‘Perceptions of National Identity and Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Immigration in Canada and Germany’, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30 (6): 653–669; Jack Citrin and John J Sides, (2008), ‘Immigration and the Imagined Community in Europe and the United States’, *Political Studies*, 56 (1):33–56; Lindstam E, Mader M, Schoen H. (2021), ‘Conceptions of National Identity and Ambivalence Towards Immigration’. *British Journal of Political Science*, 51(1), pp. 93-114.

⁷ David Miller, (1997), *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

Finally, it is important to consider what conception of British identity one wishes to promote. The predominant form in Britain at present is a somewhat backward-looking conception with strong ‘ethnic’ and exclusive aspects. While this is undoubtedly associated with national pride, it may not be the best basis for a modern diverse society.⁹

Ten years later, in 2023, the National Centre for Social Research carried out a survey across the UK on the issue of national identity and the sense of Britishness which showed three key findings:

First, most people in Britain have a civic conception rather than an ethnic conception of what it means to be British. Second, this pattern has strengthened over the past ten years. Third, after increasing between the 1990s and the 2010s, pride in Britain’s achievements has fallen during the last decade, and especially so in respect of the country’s history. At the same time, nationalist sentiment appears to have waned. Despite Brexit and the debate about immigration, Britain has become less exclusive in its attitude towards Britishness, less likely to feel a sense of superiority as compared with the rest of the world, and somewhat more critical about its politics and its past.¹⁰

Overall, the findings suggest a reduction of ‘a somewhat backward-looking conception with strong ethnic and exclusive aspects’ identified in the 2013 survey. Therefore, the 2023 report signifies that the dominant national identity mentality has been changing since 2013 in ways that the level and nature of accepting minority communities, refugees and asylum seekers, is greater and more stable. However, as the events of 2024 show, the backward-looking concept of British national identity with strong ‘ethnic’ and ‘exclusive’ aspects remains amongst a minority of British people, far-right groups, some prominent public and political figures and social influencers. The challenge, as Bhikhu Parekh wrote in his report some 23 years ago for the Runnymede Trust, is ‘How is a balance to be struck between the need to treat people equally, the need to treat people differently, and the need to maintain shared values and social cohesion?’¹¹

British Jews Advocating Solidarity, Respect, National Cohesion and Unity

In all faith communities, teachings, practices, and experiences exist that would enhance the decisions and work of political and secular actors whose responsibilities include shaping and sustaining Britain as a diverse, inclusive country. So, referring to the violence and riots in the summer of 2024, here is a brief look at the response of British Jews, and how what they said and did reflects central Jewish teachings.

The Jewish Board of Deputies representing the Orthodox Jewish community said:

⁹ Sundas Ali and Anthony Heath, (2013), *Future Identities: Changing Identities in the UK – the Next 10 Years*, UK Government Foresight Project Report, (London: Government Office for Science). <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74efe4e5274a3cb286862e/13-518-changes-in-national-and-supranational-identities.pdf> [accessed October 15, 2024].

¹⁰ John Curtice and Alex Scholes, (2024), *British Social Attitudes 41: National Identity*, (London: National Centre for Social Research). <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/british-social-attitudes-41-%7C-national-identity-1377.pdf> [accessed November 12, 2024].

¹¹ Bhikhu Parekh, (2003), *The Parekh Report: The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. (London: Profile Books), p. 40.

Attacks on Muslims, black people, members of other minorities, and our brave police officers, are totally unacceptable, and we stand in solidarity with everyone affected. As a society, we have to be better than this. We need a national conversation about how we promote respect for our country and respect for each other, and how about we tackle extremism and build cohesion.¹²

From the Masorti Jewish community Senior Rabbi, Jonathan Wittenberg, said: ‘I’m appalled at the hatred poured out against Muslim communities and at asylum seekers. As Jews, we know what it feels like to be hated for who we are. We stand in solidarity with all the victims of this racist violence’ (Ibid., para 1- 26 at 18). A ‘Statement of Solidarity’ from Liberal Judaism and the Movement for Reform Judaism said:

At this time, we must also support and stand together in solidarity with each other as communities and a country. Our ability to thrive in our diversity is inextricably linked. We must never back down in our long-standing fight against Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-immigrant prejudice and the far right’s attempts to split us.¹³

The key message in these statements is one of solidarity, the importance of speaking out and challenging those who advocate or carry out acts of intimidation and violence against members of minority communities, and the need nationally to work together to build respect and cohesion between people.

Another initiative during August was facilitated by the RSY-Netzer organization who work with young Reform Jewish people across the UK. During RSY-Netzer’s pre-summer school activities, young Jewish people between 11 and 15 discussed the riots and then wrote messages to refugees and asylum seekers who had been affected. In total, 60 messages were posted on various websites and social media. One message said: ‘Have hope and stay strong, you are welcome here and belong here despite what anyone tells you’. In another message, ‘As a Jew, I know how easy it is for minority groups to be scapegoated. You are loved, valued and respected, and always welcome in the UK. Don’t let the haters get you down’. Yet another message was written, ‘Stay strong, you are worthy of love, a home and happiness. There are so many people here who support you and want you to be here’.¹⁴ In addition, throughout August 2024, many Jews across the UK took part in anti-racism demonstrations, and local inter-faith solidarity vigils at mosques and other locations that had been targeted, as well as offering various means of support to those affected.¹⁵

¹² Jewish Board of Deputies cited in Eliana Jordan, ‘As a Society We Have To Do Better Than This: Jewish Groups Condemn Riots Against Muslims and Asylum-seekers’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, August 5, 2024. <https://www.thejc.com/community/as-a-society-we-have-to-be-better-than-this-jewish-groups-condemn-riots-against-muslims-and-asylum-seekers-hnzsu49m> [accessed December 31, 2024]. para. 1- 26 at 4-5.

¹³ Liberal Judaism and the Movement for Reform Judaism, ‘Statement of Solidarity – Standing Against Hatred and Far Right Protests’, August 9, 2024. <https://www.liberaljudaism.org/2024/08/statement-of-solidarity-against-far-right-protests/> [accessed December 31, 2024].

¹⁴ Daniel Ben-David, ‘The Power of Words: Young People Write Messages of Support to Refugees’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, August 14, 2024. <https://www.thejc.com/community/the-power-of-words-young-people-write-messages-of-support-to-refugees-x8pmuyst> [accessed January 31, 2025].

¹⁵ Liberal Judaism, ‘Progressive Jews Uniting Against the Far Right Across the Country’, *Liberal Judaism News*, August 21, 2024. <https://www.liberaljudaism.org/2024/08/progressive-jews-uniting-against-the-far-right-across-the-country/> [accessed January 31, 2025].

So, what do the words and actions of these British Jews represent within the Jewish tradition?

These express aspects of Jewish ethical and moral teachings rooted in the Hebrew scriptures and elucidated further in classical rabbinical writings concerning concepts of peace, justice, and how Jews, either as a majority or minority living in safe, temperate, or hostile contexts, must live alongside others. The importance of demonstrating respect and protecting the dignity of others is present in the Jewish tradition, it is an essential part of inter-personal holiness. The importance of protecting the dignity of others emerges from the teaching of *Tzelem Elohim* (human beings are created in the image of God), thereby constituting the notion of the ‘sanctity of life’.¹⁶

Duties to others as set out in biblical and classical Judaism are underpinned by the belief in *Tzelem Elohim*, as is the teaching of being compassionate. The Torah and the Talmud refer to God as the Compassionate One (*Rahamanan*). On the one hand, the practice of God’s compassion is specifically rooted in the covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites. On the other, it is part of *Lihidamot* or emulating God in the world through compassionate acts as an essential part of human conduct. ‘Just as God is called compassionate and gracious, so you must be compassionate and gracious’ (Sif. Dev. 11: 49). Torah teachings concerned with the treatment of strangers and neighbours are also relevant to overcoming the suspicion and fear of diversity and difference which was expressed in the 2024 riots and the increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia since October 2023. Finally, at the core of what British Jews said and did in the summer of 2024 is the Jewish teaching of *Tikkun Olam*, to repair and improve the world, which in contemporary times has become predominantly associated with social action promoting justice and peace.

All these Jewish teachings represent ethical and moral requirements that are relevant across all historical and geo-political contexts and are shown not to be options but part of our duty and responsibility towards others, to help ensure that the dignity, life, and rights of others are not threatened or violated because of their race, religion or ethnicity. A priority for all faith communities in Britain is to play an active part in nurturing and embedding respect, dignity, and justice for everyone and to be constant and persistent in challenging those who seek to undermine or destroy these values. Such values are an integral part of British values that underpin what it means to be a responsible citizen in Britain today.

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¹⁶ Richard A Freund, (1994) ‘Universal Rights in Biblical and Classical Judaism?’ *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 12, (2): pp. 50-66 at 62.