

# Diverse communities

*Rachel Montagu*

**T**HERE IS NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY, said Margaret Thatcher, only family and the individual. This is not a view which could be tenable in a Jewish context where religion is lived out in the community. Family is important, and many rituals take place in the family home, but community, a gathering of families into a congregation, is also of vital importance. This article looks at different historical Jewish definitions of what is meant by a community, and also at the way the modern Jewish world has developed different groupings as a result of the varying circumstances and cultures in the countries in which Jews live.

## *Early Jewish definitions of community*

In the Talmud, the early medieval compendium of the rabbis' legislation and storytelling, the word community is used in a number of different ways. It is used to describe the whole people of Israel as a collective entity. It is used to describe the Jews of any one country, acting collectively, and it is used to describe a synagogue. A synagogue is a group of Jews who pray together but who also function as a social grouping, meeting to support those in need, to organize and enjoy educational activities and to spend time with each other.

In the Talmudic period, the divisions between communities were geographical – one of the major influences on the Talmudic legislation was the interaction of the two major Jewish communities of the time, Babylonian and Palestinian. They produced two major sourcebooks, the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, each attuned to the different needs of their community. We hear of the scholars who travelled between the two and told each how the other community was developing its practices.

Allowing for any differences between practice in Israel and in the Diaspora, we tend to have a false image of the Jewish world at that time as relatively harmonious. The rabbis worked out their view on any topic by debating, a process which could become very emotionally charged, and on one occasion led to one rabbi feeling so isolated from his colleagues and shamed by their contempt for his opinion that his hurt feelings and God's response became a classic lesson in the importance

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of paying attention to the feelings of others.<sup>1</sup> It is however a truism that it is the victors who write history and neither Talmud contains more than glancing references to those like the Karaites (they believed in a literal interpretation of the biblical text and did not accept the less literal interpretations of the rabbis) who were not part of the rabbinic community.

### *Different areas of the Jewish world*

Over the centuries different customs developed, particularly between the European or *ashkenazi* Jewish community and the Spanish, North African and Eastern or *sephardi* community. Within the ashkenazi and sephardi worlds there were also regional differences. These differences were respected, perhaps because they were not based on ideology; they were the haphazard result of different communities, each in different circumstances, each interacting with the culture and language round them, which then informed their particular style of Jewish living.

These days, regional differences still exist and are lovingly documented in books like Claudia Roden's *History of Jewish food*<sup>2</sup> which includes recipes from around the Jewish world, many influenced by the national diet of the countries in which their originators lived. In the last three centuries another element has entered the ashkenazi world: division into different communities because of different ideology or belief as to how Jewish life in the Diaspora should be lived.

### *Differences in belief*

In the seventeenth century a new form of Jewish life grew up in Eastern Europe. The early *hasidim* (pious ones) reacted against the intellectual snobbery of Polish Jewry, a world in which scholarship was all and the uneducated lacked status. The earliest teacher of *hasidic* Judaism, the Baal Shem Tov, taught that the sincere piety of an ignorant but devout person was as precious to God as the commentaries of the most exalted sage. The *hasidim* stressed song, dancing and joy as ways to come close to God. They were pilloried by their contemporaries for irregularities in the times at which their services were held and their exaggerated respect for the *rebbe* or leader of each *hasidic* group. The ultra-orthodox descendants of their original opponents still mock the *hasidim* for their tendency to idolize their leaders and might not wish to let their daughters marry one, but now see the *hasidim* as fellow strict observers in a world in which too many Jews compromise too far with the wider non-Jewish world.

Once Jews were emancipated in European society, differences of opinion arose as to how to manage the balancing act between life as a Jew and participation in the secular non-Jewish world. Early nineteenth-century attempts in America and Germany to modernize Judaism by holding services using the vernacular (perfectly acceptable in Jewish law but breaking the convention that Jewish public prayer should be in Hebrew), cutting out some of the repetitions from the traditional service and having sermons explaining the biblical readings more frequently than the traditional twice per annum, were greeted with enthusiasm by some and with horror by others. In Germany Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch pilloried the reformers and yet himself adopted at least some of their new traditions, ministerial robes for rabbis and frequent sermons for his new orthodox group whose watchword was 'be a Jew at home and a gentleman in the street'.

### *Different Jewish religious organizations in Great Britain*

The large-scale immigration from Eastern Europe to North America and the UK at the end of the last century produced some new religious configurations. The United Synagogue was founded in England in 1870 by the existing Jewish community, who were mainly German in origin, not as well educated Jewishly as they and their children were becoming in general western learning, but keen to develop a dignified and traditional style of service. So keen were they to promote the United Synagogue as a Jewish equivalent to the Church of England that the Chief Rabbi of the day wore gaiters and ministers wore clerical collars, a tendency to imitate non-Jewish ways which would horrify the Jewish community in our day, now that it is 'OK to be ethnic' and no longer necessary for new immigrants to blend in as fast as possible. Their dignity and calm were not at all *heimish* or homelike to the large numbers of new immigrants from Eastern Europe and a separate umbrella organization was founded for the small informal synagogues they preferred. This was called the Federation of Synagogues. These two separate orthodox institutions continue to exist although they do not greatly differ in their attitudes to religious observance – yet both count among their members many who belong more from family loyalty than personal orthodox belief or practice.

Reform began in the UK in 1850 when some members of the sephardi community who had moved from the East End to the West End of London found intolerable the regulation of the Bevis Marks Synagogue (the first synagogue built in England by sephardi Jews from Holland after the Jews were permitted to return by Cromwell) that no

new synagogue be founded in London; they now lived too far away to walk comfortably to the East End on the sabbath. They and some ashkenazi Jews formed a new synagogue whose aims were the abolition of the distinction between ashkenazi and sephardi – hence the name West London Synagogue of British Jews – and the organization of a good Jewish education for their children. Only later with the import from the USA of a rabbi who had gone through the Hebrew Union College, the seminary of the American Reform Movement, was some deeper ideological underpinning found for the new congregation. Even then their actual reforms of liturgy were limited compared to the commitment to equality between the genders and use of the vernacular in prayer that are the hallmarks of most progressive services today. In 1902 the founders of what was to become the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues wished to use West London's premises for their inaugural service at which men and women were to sit together and prayers be said in English; this prospect so disconcerted the synagogue council that the service was eventually held at a nearby hotel.

While the founders of the Jewish Religious Union, later Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, did not at first envision creating a new movement, they found that their protest against what they felt to be a stultifying traditionalism could not be encompassed under the auspices of the United Synagogue, although some pillars of the United Synagogue took an interest at the early stages. Like the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, they gained enormously in numbers during the 1930s from the influx of Central European refugees from Hitler; many of the refugees had belonged to progressive synagogues in Europe and refugee rabbis provided a core of scholarly leadership which the British progressive community had previously lacked. The other part of the Anglo-Jewish world to be greatly reinforced by the Second World War immigrants was the Ultra-Orthodox, who gained both the cultured spiritual descendants of Samson Raphael Hirsch and a far larger hasidic community than had previously existed in the UK.

### *American influences*

In America a rather different religious landscape emerged. The nineteenth-century Reform movement was no more a comfortable home for the traditionalist turn-of-the-century immigrants from Russia and Poland than the United Synagogue in England. In the USA it was the newcomers who took the name United Synagogue but developed it into a rather different organization than its English cousin. The United

Synagogue was also called Conservative and stood for a traditional approach to liturgy but a more flexible attitude to innovations in Jewish law. In America most Jews belong either to Conservative or Reform congregations and those who belong to Orthodox synagogues do so out of commitment to traditional observance and the immutability of Jewish law.

Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs, an outstanding scholar, unintentionally caused a major theological controversy in the Anglo-Jewish community in 1962 when his appointment as head of Jews' College (the rabbinical seminary of the United Synagogue) and prospective future Chief Rabbi was blocked because one of the religious authorities of the United Synagogue advised the then Chief Rabbi that one of Jacobs' books, *We have reason to believe*<sup>3</sup> contained heterodox ideas on the origins of the Pentateuch, as it stated that not all the Pentateuch could be regarded as literally dictated by God to Moses. Jacobs' supporters left the United Synagogue, and their new synagogue, which later developed a small group of like-minded associates, linked themselves to the American Conservative movement. In England and Israel now they prefer to describe themselves by the Hebrew word *Masorti*, traditional, which they feel gives a clearer and less politically confusing statement of their position. Some Masorti congregations encourage a more equal role for women.

Another import from the USA to Great Britain was the *chavurah* or community group. In America in the sixties they developed as autonomous circles who preferred an enthusiastic do-it-yourself approach to a sitting passively through a formal service led by a rabbi; then many synagogues developed *chavurot* within themselves as a way of energizing the younger members of the synagogue and giving them a strong identity as a group within the larger community. In England a few *chavurot* emerged, often committed to intensifying the spiritual content of their services and some bringing a New Age style to the liturgy. Some synagogues continue their main service in their established style and also nurture an 'alternative' service which allows a different pattern of worship or gives a group within the community a stronger sense of fellowship among themselves; the *chavurot* reflected the mores of their generation, and are often more egalitarian and socially radical than their parent community.

In all these communities there is a strong underlying commitment to the Jewish people as a whole and their mutual responsibility towards each other.

It seems that at the time when Christianity is striving to find a unity which has eluded it for centuries, the Jewish world, which only began to divide on ideological as distinct from geographical grounds in the last few hundred years, is becoming ever more deeply divided. It will be interesting to see how both religions resolve or develop their internal differences over the coming generations. It seems there is a tendency for human beings to wish to group together and yet to fracture and split into separate communities because of irreconcilable ideological or personal differences. Can we accept and appreciate our diversity? The Talmud describes the conflicts between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel and how their contemporaries were unsure how to resolve their different interpretations. A voice from heaven was heard saying, 'They both speak words from the living God'.

*Rachel Montagu* was educated at Newnham College, Cambridge, Leo Baeck College, London and Machon Pardes, Jerusalem. She now teaches for a number of institutions including Allen Hall (Biblical Hebrew), Birkbeck College (Biblical Hebrew and Hebrew Bible) and Edgware Reform Synagogue (GCSE Jewish Studies). She is very interested in interfaith dialogue, especially between women.

#### NOTES

1 *Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia* 59b.

2 Claudia Roden, *The book of Jewish food* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

3 Louis Jacobs, *We have reason to believe* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1957).