There is little published literature on the placement needs of Jewish children in Britain. **Golda Smith** seeks to redress the balance, beginning with a brief historical summary of the experiences of Jews in Britain, including the roots of anti-Semitism. The article goes on to discuss the diversity within Jewishness, the importance of religion in children’s understanding of their identity, the role of family customs and the implications of such issues for social work practice. Smith concludes with a call for all placement workers to have access to training and information about the placement needs of this neglected group.

**Introduction**

Jewish people form one of Britain’s oldest identifiable minority ethnic groups. A steadily expanding body of published research documents the UK’s Jewish communal histories (Alderman, 1998), social attitudes (Goodkin and Citron, 1994) and psycho-social development (Baker, 1993; Lowenthal, 1995; Karf 1997). However, there is a surprising absence of published literature about social work practice issues regarding the needs of Jewish people, in particular the placement needs of Jewish children.

Section 22, Part III (c) of the Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities, in relation to children looked after by them, to give due consideration to the child’s religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. In the light of this requirement and informed by the research of Schmool and Miller (1994), who found in-family transmission of Jewish traditions and values to be the single most significant factor in retaining Jewish identity, it should be obligatory for all placement agencies to address the holistic needs of Jewish children within Jewish family settings.

Ethnic monitoring at the beginning of the 21st Century generally groups Jewish people living in Britain within the category of ‘white UK’ or ‘other’. Thus the needs of Jewish people, together with those of other widely diverse ‘white’ minority ethnic communities, such as the Roma (Gypsies) and Irish people, are commonly omitted, overlooked and unidentified in demand-led services. This article aims to raise awareness and understanding of the distinct placement needs of Jewish children in Britain by highlighting the experiences of Jews in Britain, the diversity of Jewish identities and by identifying some practice issues.

**Historical context**

Jews first came to Britain with the Romans in 70 BCE. (Before Common Era is the Judaic equivalent to the Christian BC.) During the medieval period Jews were accorded few rights and were expected to act as a source of loans for kings, noblemen and crusaders (Romain, 1988). Although at times Jews lived in peace and security, they provided a ready focus for discontent (Vital, 1999). Increasing restrictions on Jewish economic and social lives accompanied periodic outbreaks of violence, including massacres of Jews in Norwich, York and London.

In 1220, the remnants of England’s Jewish communities were expelled by King Edward I. Despite a Jewish absence from these shores, anti-Semitic myths continued to be transmitted as an intrinsic part of British culture, reinforced by Church dogma and Renaissance literature. Jewish people were forbidden to live in England until 1656, when Cromwell granted permission for a Jewish return. In 1858, full political rights were conceded to Jewish people when the first Jewish Member of Parliament was permitted to take his seat without being required to swear a Christian oath.

State-sponsored persecution of Jews led to mass migration from Central and Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1910.
Britain’s Jewish population rapidly increased and led to the Aliens Act of 1905, restricting Jewish immigration, from which current immigration laws stem. Britain, however, was not experienced as a wholly safe Jewish haven. In 1936, although London’s Jewish community prevented Oswald Mosley’s black-shirted Fascists from marching through London’s Jewish East End, support for the British Union of Fascists increased in the UK (Linehan, 1998). There had also been anti-Jewish riots in Limerick, Ireland, in 1904, and in Tredegar, Wales, in 1911.

Jewish people experienced contradictory policies from the British establishment before and during World War II. Ten thousand European Jewish children were allowed to enter Britain on the ‘Kindertransports’ in 1939. An additional 70,000 Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution found homes in Britain, joining the established community which numbered almost half a million after the war. However, in 1940, a decision was taken to arrest male adult Jews not holding British citizenship. They were taken from their families, interned alongside known Nazi sympathisers (Cesarani and Kushner, 1993) and some were deported to Australia.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Anglo-Jewry was augmented by refugees fleeing from Hungary, ejected from Egypt and emigrating from Arab countries including Iran, Iraq and Yemen. Currently, Jews who emigrate to Israel or assimilate through inter-marriage are being partially counter-balanced by new Jewish immigrants from South Africa and Israel. Jewish life is increasingly polarised into strictly orthodox communities and communities seeking adaptation. The 2001 Census will contain a question on religious identity which includes the category ‘Jewish’. This will not reflect Anglo-Jewry’s diverse expressions of Jewishness, particularly the more problematic identity of secular Jews.

**Anti-Semitism**

Anti-Semitism within England, Scotland and Wales remains difficult to acknowledge and confront. It is remarkable that while a UN Resolution (now rescinded) condemned Zionism as racism in 1976, it was only in December 1998 that the United Nations General Assembly, for the first time, defined anti-Semitism as a form of racism to be monitored and condemned.


- anti-Judaism – hostility to the beliefs and practices of the Jewish religion;
- anti-Semitic racism – hostility to Jews as a separate race; and
- anti-Zionism – hostility towards Jewish national identity, focusing on Israel.

Wistrich (1992) noted that anti-Semitism has occurred everywhere in Western society in the past 2,000 years and that Jews do not have to be poor or powerless, rich or powerful, or capitalist or socialist to provide a context for contradictory anti-Semitic myths.

Currently attempts are being made by various Christian denominations to address ‘nearly 2,000 years of anti-Semitism perpetrated by the Christian Church’ (Solemn Declaration signed by 3,355 Christians, 1999). Within living memory, there has been a serious attempt to make Jewish people extinct. Between 1939 and 1945, approximately one-and-a-half million Jewish children and five million adults were murdered in Europe because they were Jewish. British right-wing extremists continue to target Jewish individuals and organisations in their literature and in practice. In the last 12 months anti-Semitic attacks in the UK have included the enforced re-housing of a Jewish family following a four-month campaign by an anti-Semitic gang (Baum, 1999) and the distribution of hundreds of ‘Nazi’ hoax letters calling for Jewish people in North London to assemble for ‘transportation’.

Yet anti-Semitism, the oldest hatred, is not generally mentioned when anti-
Discriminatory practice is promoted in family placement work; the meaning of racism is most often confined to what white people do to black people. Furthermore, training for social workers does not usually offer opportunities to confront pejorative language about Jews or negative stereotypes of Jewish clients, colleagues or students, or to learn about their needs.

Diversity
Diversity within Jewishness reflects ethnic origin as well as religious beliefs, cultural heritage and identity. One-hundred-and-fifty years ago, the majority of Jewish people resident in England were Sephardim (Jews of Spanish or Portuguese origin), living as a distinct sub-group within English society. One hundred years ago, Jews of Eastern and Central Europe (Ashkenazim) left pogroms and oppression behind them to make perilous journeys, culminating in their descendants becoming citizens of the UK or the USA.

Coyle and Rafalin (1999) suggest branches of Judaism can be differentiated in terms of beliefs about Torah (the Jewish scriptures). Orthodox Judaism holds that the Torah was divinely revealed and is immutable. Reform Judaism views the Torah as divinely inspired but open to revision. Observant communities range from Chassidic (ultra-orthodox), United and Modern Orthodox, and Masorti (traditional) to Reform, Progressive and Liberal. Within each community there may be gradations of religious observance. Observant Jews eat only kosher food prepared by themselves or by fellow members of their community; others will eat kosher at home but be more lenient when they eat out; many will not eat kosher at all but avoid pork and shellfish; and many secular Jews do not keep any dietary laws. Secular Jews who choose not to belong to a community or to attend a synagogue may consider themselves to be wholly Jewish. It is not uncommon to celebrate the Jewish holidays in a spirit of historical togetherness rather than spiritual faith.

Most Jewish children will learn to read Hebrew for their batmitzvah or barmitzvah (coming of age for girls at 12 and boys at 13). Many will learn Ivrit (modern Hebrew) as the language of Israel and only a few will learn Ladino in the Sephardic tradition. However, Jewish people who are not very senior citizens or Chassidim now tend to know only a few Yiddish words and phrases.

Circumcision is deemed obligatory by all religious Jews, except on rare medical grounds. Circumcision is also observed by many secular Jews. Boys are circumcised when they are eight days old to symbolise the Jewish covenant with G-d. There is no equivalent ceremony for girls.

Jacky Gordon, Head of the Norwood Jewish Adoption Agency, feels that professional umbrella usage of ‘Jewish’ commonly ignores the range of each family’s religious and cultural background and the diversity of the communities. A manager of one local authority permanent placement team suggests that beyond Brent, Barnet, Hackney, Harringey, Redbridge, Gateshead, Leeds and Manchester, where there are overtly Jewish communities, local authority workers have no greater understanding of the diversity of Jews than has the general population.

Identity
Within the Halacha (Jewish Law) children cannot be half Jewish. Orthodox Judaism determines Jewish status solely by whether a child’s mother is born Jewish or has undergone an Orthodox Jewish conversion. Reform Judaism also confers Jewish status on children with Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers.

In considering the importance of religion in children’s understanding of their own identity, Bee (1989) notes that core beliefs about self are pervasive, develop early and are not easily changed. Jewish identity is complex and may principally focus on Jewish religion, Jewish culture, Jewish nationhood, all three or none of these. A sense of being Jewish may be transmitted through immediate family, extended family, peers, community or definition by others; even thoroughly assimilated Jews were identified and persecuted by the Nazis. Feelings about Jewish identity may
intensify or wane with life events such as birth, barmitzvah, betrothal or bereavement. Political events which have served as a catalyst for Jewish identification include Israel’s Six-day War in 1967, the rights of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel and, currently, the plight of Iraqi Jews.

Jewish people may choose not to offer information about their Jewish identity. While Jewish immigrants to the USA tended to retain their ‘foreign sounding’ names in a society where the majority were immigrants, English Jewish families frequently anglicised their names in an attempt to ‘fit in’. Professionals may need to make it safe for a Jewish person to reveal their identity.

The Shema, the prayer which many Jewish children know by heart, instructs parents to ‘teach their children diligently about Jewish religion when they sit in their house, walk in the street, lie down to go to sleep and get up in the morning’. Children are central in Jewish religion and culture: Jewish families are central in transmitting Jewish identity.

Implications for practice

Impact of the Holocaust

The UK escaped the ravages of the Shoah (Holocaust) but for many people living in this country it has had a significant impact on their shared and personal heritage. It would be surprising if the family dynamics of the children and grandchildren of refugees and Holocaust survivors were unaffected.

Customarily, Jewish Ashkenazi children are named after dead family members of previous generations; Sephardi children may be named after living relatives. Children named after loved ones may carry the burden of fulfilling past lives cut short, serving as living memorial candles to relatives who have died. Anne Karpf (1997) writes of her own family’s experience as ‘The War After’. She lists ‘parenting of parents’, high expectations of children, guilt at surviving, reluctance to seek therapeutic help and the taboos about griefs being passed on from one generation to the next. Karpf’s explorations of the specific psychological baggage carried by some children and grandchildren of survivors have relevance also for other refugees and asylum seekers.

Jewish agencies

Jewish systems of self-help and social welfare grew from one of the core pillars of Jewish faith: the giving of charity as a righteousness. At times, access to any alternative provision was denied to Jewish people and Jews feared the attempts of charitable missionary organisations to undermine Judaism. Therefore Jewish voluntary agencies have traditionally tried to meet the needs of Jewish children in Jewish placements. However, Smith (1993) observed that some Jewish families prefer to work with non-Jewish agencies. Despite professional assurances, families living in small communities have concerns about confidentiality within Jewish agencies. Fears that community members may be related or know of each other are commonly shared by other minority ethnic service users.

Although other Jewish voluntary agencies provide children’s services in the UK, Norwood-Ravenswood Family Placement Service and Norwood Jewish Adoption Society make up the largest Jewish child and family charity in Europe. As a specialised adoption agency, registered with the Department of Health, Norwood offers the full range of adoption services while all other placement needs can be met by the family placement service. All Jewish agencies seek to work jointly with local authorities and other voluntary agencies so that Jewish issues can be sensitively handled. Norwood is willing to have some involvement in the placement of all Jewish children in this country. They believe that while religion, culture, ethnicity and language must be seriously taken into account, it might become necessary to explore wider options if a Jewish placement cannot be found within agreed time scales.

Recruitment

Since the 1976 Adoption Act, rabbis have been unable to fulfil traditional roles in third-party adoptions but remain active in recruiting families from their communities to apply for a particular child. For example, when the placement
needs of a Jewish child revealed an absence of approved Jewish carers in one community, two families responded to a direct request from their rabbi. They were trained and approved by their own local authority to foster both Jewish and non-Jewish children.

**Matching**

Jacky Gordon of Norwood stresses the importance of understanding that Jewish children need to be placed with appropriate Jewish families rather than with any Jewish family. This is the same as for all other minority groups. Norwood does not place a child from a non-observant family with a strictly orthodox family or vice versa. The life-styles of Chassidic families, in particular, vary in very specific ways from life in secular families. Strictly orthodox children may never have seen television or visited a cinema; they may wear special clothes and they may read only certain books. As always in placement work, it is the understanding of children’s needs and not the rules which matter. For example, two foster carers interviewed by the author do not view diversity of Jewish religious practice as a problem. Since 1982, they have provided short-stay foster placements and respite care for a wide range of Jewish children, some of whom had not previously eaten kosher food, attended synagogue or been familiar with the smells, tastes, language or customs of a traditional Jewish home. The couple still managed to find sufficient common ground with these children to offer them the choice to learn about their heritage through experiencing life in a traditional Jewish home.

Advice regarding conversion to Judaism in infant adoptions should be referred to the Beth Din (Rabbinical Court) and discussed together with the family’s own rabbi.

**Contact**

Shared knowledge and understanding of Jewish customs can ease the way for contact between Jewish carers and Jewish birth families. Trust between two families may be built on their mutually inherited culture and experiences, regardless of levels of religious observance. Nevertheless, contact arrangements in Jewish adoptions have to be as sensitively planned and supported as in non-Jewish adoptions.

**Family customs**

Practitioners working with Jewish families need to be reminded that if questions about family customs are not asked, information may remain inaccessible, which may, in turn, affect outcomes. Whereas there is an expectation that religious customs are important to Asian people, and could be important to African-Caribbean people, there is an assumption that white people do not hold strong religious beliefs and that cultural heritage is not a defining factor for them.

The following case examples illustrate the distress caused to clients when there is professional ignorance of Jewish needs.

**Case 1** Following the judicial report into the removal of children from the Orkneys after allegations of ritual child abuse, Fraser (1991) related the anger of a Jewish mother whose children were summarily removed into the care of the local authority. She listed examples of professional ignorance about the religious needs of Jewish children and said that social workers seemed unaware that being Jewish actually had some meaning for the children. The importance, to this family, of the ensuing festival of Pesach (Passover) was not recognised. The social workers should have found out, the mother said, that Pesach required a celebratory *seder* (meal), customarily attended by the extended family, where children play a central role. They should have known that orthodox families spend weeks beforehand rigorously cleansing their houses of breadcrumbs (leaven) and then eat only special food for eight days. The children’s expectations at this time should have been understood.

**Case 2** This involved an initial child protection investigation visit paid to a Jewish family on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar). The case allocation was deemed ‘culturally sensitive’ by the team manager
because the Israeli mother was dark skinned and the social worker was African-Caribbean. Specific cultural and religious needs of the service user were ignored and calendars were not consulted. The visit coincided with the end of 25 hours of fasting during which time this mother had consumed neither food or drink.

Finance
Local authorities must understand the financial implications when placing Jewish children. For example, kosher meat may cost twice as much as ordinary meat. Jewish communities have to pay for the upkeep of their own institutions including religious education classes for their children. In addition, many ultra-orthodox families have more than five children. Financial constraints, which may affect discretionary decisions about involving Jewish agencies, could work against the best interests of a Jewish child.

Accessing resources
Professionals in non-Jewish agencies report lack of knowledge of resources available to Jewish service users (Smith, 1993). Rabbis and local synagogues are good sources of information about national and local support for Jewish children. Some communities have their own regional Jewish welfare services. There is an evident need for comprehensive information on meeting the needs of Jewish children to be mapped out on a database.

Placement checklist
Smith (1993) identified an unmet demand from professionals for guidelines in working with Jewish children and families. The following checklist may be useful but is by no means comprehensive:

- The placement needs of Jewish children are diverse but are likely to be most appropriately met within Jewish families.

- Ask children and families to describe their own levels of religious observance and what being Jewish means to them. Children’s answers about their religion may provide a key to life story work. Note any specific needs regarding food, clothing, gender issues, language, proximity to synagogues and kosher shops, continuing Jewish education and contact with other Jewish people.

- Whenever possible refer to, or consult with, a Jewish child placement agency. Contact Jewish organisations, rabbis and community leaders regarding local Jewish facilities.

- Be aware of the dilemmas some families face when asked questions about their identity or family history. Go gently when tackling genograms with families who have sustained appalling losses. Avoid using terms like ‘Christian names’ and ‘christening’ and the use of crosses to symbolise death on genograms.

- Check an inter-denominational calendar regarding Sabbath and festival times and dates before making appointments for meetings, visits or contact arrangements.

- Circumcision for baby boys at eight days of age should be considered and planned in consultation with family members. Be prepared to discuss knowledge and understanding of barmitzvah and batmitzvah celebrations with 12- and 13-year-old children and their families.

- There are particular requirements for Jewish people concerning bereavement. Children who have lost parents or siblings, and parents who have lost children may have additional needs to bereavement counselling. Consult with the extended family and a rabbi of the community.

- Professional awareness of own pre-judices, negative stereotypes and assumptions should be checked and addressed when working with Jewish people.

Conclusions
Despite attempts to assimilate or exterminate Jews in many countries and many centuries, anti-Semitism is not included in anti-oppressive practice training for social workers. Notwithstanding the requirements of section 22 of the Children Act 1989, professionals do not always place the same emphasis on the often invisible...
religious and cultural rights of children as they place on more explicit ethnic rights.

Placement workers need to understand the full diversity of what being Jewish means to individual Jewish families, whether they are clients or carers. In spite of differences in observance ranging from the ultra orthodox to the secular, Jewishness is not to be underestimated as the primary value base which continues to hold Jews together in religious and cultural communities.

Hyman (1986) suggests that so many aspects of Jewish experience are ridiculed or criticised that Jews point defensively to Jewish family life as a model of domestic behaviour. The powerful myth of strong Jewish families, idealised and perpetuated by Jews as well as non-Jews, can serve to mitigate against the placement needs of Jewish children. The very existence of Jewish adoption and fostering agencies is evidence that Jewish families are not always able to look after their children.

While Jewish voluntary agencies are prepared to be involved in the placement of all Jewish children, other voluntary and statutory agencies are not obliged to refer to them or to consult with them. It is therefore necessary for all placement workers to have access to training and information about the placement needs of Jewish children.

It is the right of Jewish children to have their religious and cultural heritage acknowledged and valued. Jewish families play a key role in the transmission and nurturing of Jewish identity. Wherever possible, Jewish children of any age and with any disability should be offered placements with Jewish carers.

Note
Roskill’s article in Community Care (1994) acted as a catalyst for the formation of the Jewish Social Work Education Group, sponsored largely by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work in 1995–97. People concerned about the education of social workers formed a group to share experiences of the exclusion of anti-Semitism from the remit of anti-discriminatory practice, resulting in a training pack to be published in 2000. Further information is available from Henry Ross, University of Northumbria, Tel 0191 215 6253.

References
Baum S, ‘Racism victim is offered new home by council’, Jewish Chronicle, p 15, 8 October 1999
Coyle A and Rafalin D, ‘Negotiating cultural, religious and sexual identity: Jewish gay men’s account of sexual identity development in their youth’, SPERI Dept. of Psychology, University of Surrey, 1999