

Are you arguing with me?

Simon Roker meets two of the founders of a new forum to encourage fresh thinking and passionate debate within the disparate tribes of British Jewry

A rare thing happened in Northwood just before Pesach. A United Synagogue rabbi shared a platform with a Liberal one at a synagogue lunch club, swapping thoughts on Creation, the afterlife and the Jewish attitude to pets. Thunderbolts did not hurtle across the sky, the walls did not cave in, the columns of the Jewish Tribune remained silent...

Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis have appeared together in public before but not actually to talk about Judaism, at least for many years. It's a fact which says something about contemporary British Jewry, where the dead hand of religious politics and institutional conservatism has too often stifle discussion on the issues that matter.

Now a group of younger Jews want to break through the walls of silence and set up a forum where people from different walks of Jewish life can talk, exchange views and argue with each other. Sociologist Dr Keith Kahn-Harris and musician Daniel Jonas are two of the founders of the Centre for New Jewish Thought, which exists now as a website but which they aspire to turn into a fully fledged think tank sponsoring publications, events and research.

"I've always been fed up that public debate in Jewish life seems to be the repetition of fixed positions by people representing long-established organisations," Jonas says. "We're not constrained by the need to represent a particular constituency nor is anybody we've involved. We've sought out people who we believe have interesting, worthwhile, well-thought-out opinions. We want to provide a platform to air them."

Contributions are welcome from any wing of British Jewry, from charedi to secular (though the line is drawn at Jews for Jesus). But participants must be ready to face the heat of debate. "If somebody from a mainstream Orthodox perspective wants to write something for us to say that if you don't accept *Torah min Hashamayim* [the doctrine of divine authorship of the Torah], you are not a proper Jew, we'd be perfectly happy to put that in. But together with people [arguing] against that position," Kahn-Harris says.



Open to argument: the Centre for New Jewish Thought's Keith Kahn-Harris (left) and Daniel Jonas Photo: Vicky Alhadeff

And there is one other principle. "You can be cutting, you can destroy somebody's argument. But you can't be abusive. We're not going to allow terms like 'self-hating Jew' or 'Orthodox bigot.'"

The first few articles have been posted as samplers on the website, on "anti-anti-Semitism" and "what's

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the point of interfaith dialogue?" But all lines of inquiry are possible. Is modern Orthodoxy being pushed out by the "Artsroll" tendency? Could there be any benefits from mixed-faith relationships? Do some young Jews feel excluded from Jewish society by the "cult of the young professional?" What do we mean by Jewish renewal or outreach? What are the

issues for Jews today?

So far the project has a core organising group of half-a-dozen, with a ring of 20-30 associates. "We are quite a disparate group," says Kahn-Harris. "The thing that links us together is that we are all interested in finding how to deal with the fact that there's a lot of diversity in the Jewish world. For us, pluralism means more than just getting people into a room together. It means getting people to engage with often really tough questions."

The two men knew each other from school — Haberdashers' Aske's in Elstree — and are winter Limmud regulars. They became better acquainted after Daniel met Keith's wife, Deborah — an assistant rabbi at Southgate Reform Synagogue — through interfaith work.

Extending interfaith dialogue is one of Jonas's passions. "It's been very much a rich man's playground... We're interested in getting dialogue to the grassroots. It's shocking to see the level of ignorance about others' culture and religion that I hear around

the dinner table. I know the same is true in the Islamic world and in the Christian world.

"If we can't speak from our own personal experience of what it's like to know other people, we're simply going to fall back on the stereotypes we've always entertained."

But Jews of different stripes also need to learn how to talk to each other, too. It may be all well and good, Kahn-Harris observes, for the heads of the different synagogue bodies to meet regularly behind closed doors — as they have done since the 1998 Stanmore Accords (a peace agreement following a particularly rancorous bout of religious infighting).

But the Faustian bargain, he argues, is that the accords inhibits more open dialogue between the various groups. "That doesn't help the evolution of British Jewry," he says. "It doesn't help create a more exciting, effervescent, thinking atmosphere."

The Centre for New Jewish Thought can be found at: <http://newjewishthought.blogspot.com>

The metal Jew and the band leader

Keith Kahn-Harris, 34, is a sociologist who teaches for the Open University, with a special interest in the heavier end of heavy metal music. His book on the subject "Extreme Metal — Music and Culture on the Edge," which includes interviews with Israeli bands, is out in December. He has recently completed an article on Jewish rap for an academic journal. Research work for Jewish organisations include co-authorship of a major survey of Anglo-Jewish identity for the United Jewish Israel Appeal and currently an interfaith study for the Board of Deputies. His personal website is <http://www.kahn-harris.org>

Daniel Jonas, 36, a management consultant with an MBA and a MSc in systems analysis, is best-known as the founder in 2000 of Los Desterrados (The Exiles), the Sephardi flamenco group which has sparked a new interest in Ladino music among young British Jews. A graduate of the Machon gap-year programme in Israel with RSY-Netzer, he subsequently moved from Masorti to a more Orthodox position, influenced by the Muslims he met through interfaith work. "They were inspiring, almost high on God," he recalls, "That's a fantastic way to be, I thought, why isn't there that passion in Judaism? I went back and found it, in the traditional Sephardi world."

Booklog

Unequal contest between the rabbi and the Bu-ju

DANIEL JONAS

Letters to a Buddhist Jew
Akiva Tatz and David Gottlieb
Targum/Feldheim, £16.30

Framed as a series of letters between the celebrated Rabbi Tatz of the JLE (Jewish Learning Exchange) outreach organisation and David Gottlieb, an American Jewish Zen Buddhist, "Letters to a Buddhist Jew" is a superlative, five-star exposition of the JLE's brand of Orthodoxy. To be fair, it does not purport to be an encounter between Judaism and Buddhism, yet the co-authorship suggests a meeting of equals, which this manifestly isn't.

Genuinely interested in the needs of his correspondent, Tatz keenly examines what attracts Gottlieb so strongly to Buddhism. It's hardly a level playing field: conveniently, Got-

tleib is from a non-Orthodox background and is encountering intellectual challenge and spiritual complexity within Judaism for the first time. Naturally, this allows Tatz to play to his undeniable strengths and display his vast intellect and knowledge, but his correspondent is, ultimately, a straw man.

Tatz, unsurprisingly, demolishes his sophomoric misconceptions about Judaism with little difficulty. Gottlieb hasn't lived a Torah life, so he can simply be told how it would meet all his deepest needs. Clearly, a couple of decades in the right yeshivah and the rightness of Tatz's case would be obvious.

This "if-you-only-tried-it, you'd-see-we're-right" argument may wash with the Jewishly ignorant, but flies in the face of knowledgeable, principled dissent. Like most quality *kiruv* (outreach), this book makes a superb case for the perfection of the Orthodox system while at the

same time utterly failing to acknowledge the shortcomings that drove many to leave it in the first place.

It would be instructive to know if Gottlieb's Conservative wife, who is so viscerally offended by Buddhist statuary, is happy for her husband to commit to Tatz's brand of Orthodoxy instead.

Tatz is careful to emphasise his refusal to debate the comparative merits of Judaism and Buddhism; his interest in the latter is merely as a barrier that must be overcome before Gottlieb can be saved. This is a pity, because Judaism offers an unrivalled range of intellectual, spiritual and cultural resources. It has nothing to fear from the encounter with other traditions and much to gain by forcing us to question who we are and where we come from.

Although my own spiritual path has led me back to Jewish tradition, the passion, cultural so-

phistication and authenticity I sought was only identified through encounters with Muslims from the deeply musical Sufi traditions, enabling me to locate it in my own Sephardic roots.

Unfortunately, in my experience, interfaith dialogue is treated by so-called "Torah Judaism" as a waste of time, at best a platform for patronising self-justification: anything worthwhile, it is claimed, Judaism thought of first, so we have nothing to learn. This arrogance and chauvinism is a missed opportunity, the indubitably effective outreach machine preferring to teach its customers to be cowed into awestruck timidity by black hats, despite the veneer of awkwardly happy-clappy pseudo-chasidut, bagels and speed-dating.

This downside, however, is naturally absent from what remains a fascinating work by a master of *kiruv* at the height of his powers.