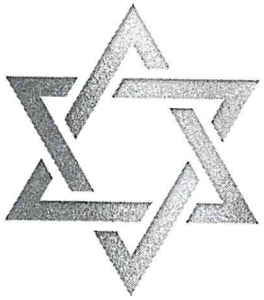
BEN M. FREEMAN

JEWISH



PRIDE

Rebuilding a People

INTRODUCTION

My name is Ben Maxwell Freeman.

I am an author and educator. I was born in Glasgow, Scotland. I am 34 years old and I am a proud Jewish gay man.

The concept of pride has been incredibly important to me as a gay person. It helped me reject the shame of homophobia and accept who I am. What I have been exploring is how I, an LGBTQ+ Jew, can harness the concept of pride to empower and inspire my Jewish community in the way it has done for my LGBTQ+ community.

Being a member of two minority groups has forced me to think very deeply about my identity, about the essence of who I am. With reference to my sexuality, while I came out at the age of 19, my journey towards being comfortable with myself was challenging and wrought with difficulty. Like many LGBTQ+ people, I suffered from severe mental health issues which led me to self-harm and attempt suicide. This was not necessarily because I was surrounded by homophobes. It was more nuanced than this: society taught me – sometimes explicitly and at other times implicitly – that there was something wrong with being gay. I never saw myself represented in society. I felt isolated, broken and ashamed.

My journey to self-acceptance took a long time, but I can now say that I am very much proud of being gay and incredibly proud to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

As we know, the concept of pride is essential to the LGBTQ+ community – we celebrate it once a year. Being part of the LGBTQ+ community, which, through pride, actively empowers its members to take ownership of their identity and celebrate all aspects of who they are, has been empowering. Pride taught me to not just accept my identity, but to celebrate it. Being part of a community that, despite intense persecution which continues to this very day, has managed to build lives that are meaningful, connected, empowered and community-oriented makes me proud. Pride has helped me as an LGBTQ+ person feel comfortable with who I am. But, above all, it has taught me that I have the right to be here and to advocate for myself and my community, which is a lesson I also think that some Jewish people could learn.

BEING A GAY JEW

Reflecting on my own personal experiences of being both gay and Jewish, I have observed some similarities in how both Jews and LGBTQ+ people are perceived by wider society. Specifically, in the way that some LGBTQ+ people and some Jews 'pass' as members of the majority. 'Passing' is the idea that a minority is able to be identified as a member of the majority. A gay person could be perceived as straight, while a light-skinned Jew could be perceived as a white non-Jew, or a Black Jew as a Black non-Jew.

There are those who describe the ability of some LGBTQ+ people and some Jews to pass as a 'privilege'. However, from my experience, this is a specific form of oppression itself. As a young, closeted teenager, I suffered extreme mental health difficulties because I was hiding who I was. That I could pass as straight meant that I could avoid suffering direct homophobic abuse from those around me, but I assure you I did suffer.

Nonetheless, being able to pass does absolutely offer a layer of protection (and certainly allows one to benefit from different kinds

of advantages), but the pain and experiences that accompanies it reveals quite clearly that it is not a guarantee for circumventing prejudice – one can simply experience a different version of the prejudice. It also can lead to internalised shame, a false sense of inclusion and safety, and the isolation that can often come once your true identity is revealed.

Similarly, as a light-skinned Jewish person living in a non-Jewish world, I can pass as a non-Jew – which means I am often perceived as a white person. This obviously means I benefit from the advantage of being perceived as white. Yet I remain a Jew. I endure the realities of intergenerational trauma, I am dealing with my own trauma from the multitude of antisemitism I personally have experienced, and my community is also collectively battling modern antisemitism. This is the common Jewish reality, regardless of whether we can pass or not.

It is also true that when you are able to pass, you see the way the world treats you when they think you are part of the majority, as opposed to when they realise you are a minority. The discrepancy is real, and it is something I have experienced several times throughout my life. At this point, any advantages that a passing minority experiences can be revoked when their true identity is revealed. Passing is also something that mainstream society can resent. They can feel they are being deliberately tricked as they interpret your existence as an attempt to make them believe that you are 'one of them'; in my case, a white heterosexual person of European ancestry. When a major antisemitic trope paints Jews as inherently shifty tricksters who often camouflage themselves, a light-skinned Jew passing as a non-Jew can become a specific focus of antisemitic hate.

To many antisemites, Jews – and, in particular, light-skinned Jews – represent the worst kind of threat because they may not be able to detect us until it's 'too late'. Therefore, they must act against us before we're able to 'strike' at them from within.

At this point, I want to offer some thoughts on the word 'privilege' that I mentioned earlier. Unless they are visibly Jewish, light-skinned

Jews benefit from the advantage of being perceived as white, and this is something that should be recognised. Yet, as I also explained, while they benefit from being perceived as white by non-Jewish society, these light-skinned Jews still suffer from the serious and deadly threat of antisemitism and the shame that goes along with it.

So, the question is: how do we discuss these different and complex manifestations of prejudice? I believe that using the word 'privilege' to describe these different manifestations lacks the nuance needed to properly understand prejudice. The word 'privilege' can imply an immovable fixed status, which is not rooted in the reality of these issues. It is also a word loaded with antisemitism when it comes to Jewish people, due to the misconception that all Jews are wealthy and powerful. I believe using the terms 'advantage' and 'disadvantage' not only contains less antisemitic undertones, they are also more reflective of the realities of how prejudice works.

For example, if I am walking down the street holding hands with my light-skinned partner, we are at risk of being attacked for being a same-sex couple. In this instance, we, because of our sexual orientation, are not benefiting from the advantage of being heterosexual. However, we would not be targeted because of the colour of our skin, and therefore benefit from the advantage of being white / being perceived as white. Alternatively, a Black heterosexual person walking down the street with their partner benefits from the advantage of being heterosexual yet can suffer disadvantage due to of the colour of their skin.

In both scenarios, both sets of people experience advantages and disadvantages at the same moment. This is a more nuanced way to discuss and understand these issues. These concepts are moving, fluid and change depending on the context. It is not that the concept of 'privilege' has not been, and cannot be, useful at some points, but I believe we should always be seeking to advance nuance in our conversations.

To me, having faced both antisemitism and homophobia, the notion that these groups are 'privileged' indicates a serious misunderstanding of prejudice. Ranking oppressed groups in a hierarchy of oppression fails to understand that advantage and disadvantage can interact and exist in one person, it also leads minorities to fight one another, instead of our common enemies. What we must instead understand is the different manifestations of prejudice, as opposed to seeing bigotry through a binary lens. Being gay and Jewish has taught me that we must represent and respect each and every community's lived experience in order to understand the full range of human experiences.

REJECTION

Another aspect of my experience of being both gay and Jewish with specific regard to parts of the left, is that my homosexuality is often embraced and accepted, while my Jewishness is often very much not. In fact, it is fair to say that, because of antisemitism, I sadly do not feel comfortable being a Jew in progressive LGBTQ+ spaces.

While it is obviously not a hard and fast rule, there have been several recent examples where members of the so-called progressive community have rejected their Jewish LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters.

For example, in 2019, the Dyke March in Washington banned Jewish symbols. The march organiser, Rai Gaines, was quoted as saying: 'This includes Israeli flags, as well as flags that resemble Israeli flags, such as a pride flag with a Star of David in the middle.'[1] As a gay Jew, it is my right to express the intersection of my two identities as I see fit and for one to try and police the other is deeply disturbing.

I have seen on the left that there are those who are attempting to cause a disconnect between my two identities, despite the historically close relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and parts of the Jewish community, which we will explore in Chapter 12. At first sight, many people might perceive the source of this tension as being my Jewishness. When I say 'Jewishness', I mean it as an identity not solely

connected to Judaism, the religion, but rather one that is rooted in the idea of a Jewish ethnicity, religion and people as a whole.

Religious communities (and Jews are often perceived as *only* being a religious community) are often thought of as being intolerant to the LGBTQ+ community. However, in my experience, I have more often than not found myself accepted and respected in Jewish spaces. And I am particularly proud of the Jewish community for providing so many safe spaces for their LGBTQ+ family.

This is not to say that homophobia is not an issue in parts of the Jewish community, it absolutely is – as it is in all communities – and I have experienced it myself. When I was working for a Holocaust education organisation, I was accused by one board member of having a 'gay agenda' because I suggested highlighting the persecution of LGBTQ+ people by the Nazis. Within that same organisation, I was also told to remove any mention of gay people from an online statement which discussed a homophobic attack. After complaining about the latter, several board members sat me down and told me that it was not an expression of homophobia. It was, and their behaviour was nothing but gaslighting.

However, the ultimate source of the tension between two aspects of my identity emanates from the progressive world. Quite simply, being Jewish has led me to being expelled from what David Hirsh, a British academic, terms the 'community of the good'.[2] This idea is rooted in the notion that you believe those with your political beliefs and values are inherently 'good' and everyone else is outside your community and is 'bad'. This has taken many forms throughout history, but, in this case, refers to the fascism of modern-day progressives.

I am a Zionist Jew. This simply means that I support the concept of a Jewish state, in the Jewish indigenous homeland. Yet, sadly, much of the tension between LGBTQ+ progressives and Jews centres on Zionism, and specifically the concept of 'pinkwashing'. This is the accusation that Israel purposefully exaggerates its strong record on

LGBTQ+ rights as a means to diminish its treatment of the Palestinians. These accusations are deeply illogical, hurtful and are a direct attack on my identity as a gay Jew.

Despite the antisemitism of pinkwashing, Tel Aviv is often – and justifiably – described as 'the gay capital of the Middle East'.[3] It is one of the only places in the world where I can comfortably express my two identities at once. It was where I attended my first drag show and where I feel most free as a gay Jew. But when the Eurovision song contest took place in Israel in 2019, it was met with fierce opposition from some on the left, including from within the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, more than 100 'queer and trans liberation organizations from nearly 20 countries across Europe and beyond … [called] on global LGBTQIA communities to boycott the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest in Israel'.[4]

The fact that my supposed LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters have decided that being a Jewish Zionist is not compatible with fighting for LGBTQ+ rights is not only completely illogical; it is also devastating. This rejection has real-life consequences. It impacts my mental health and undoes the incredibly hard work I have put into feeling comfortable in both of my identities. It also leads to the erasure – through the constant focus on Israel – of LGBTQ+ people in other parts of the Middle East who regularly face legal and violent persecution, including in Palestine.

I am a progressive gay Jew and I believe in progressive values, but because of my Jewishness and my belief in a Jewish state, I am no longer welcome in many left-wing spaces.

It *is* possible to be a Zionist Jew *and* a progressive. These identities are not mutually exclusive. My membership of the progressive community should not depend on me abandoning my Zionism; in fact, it should include me *because* I am a Zionist. Zionism is nothing but the movement to return an ethno-religious minority, a nation and a people, to their indigenous homeland, which should perfectly align with progressive values.

Thankfully, despite the propaganda around pinkwashing, there are still LGBTQ+ people who understand the important part Israel plays in the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights. Tel Aviv Pride, which takes place every June, sees 250,000 LGBTQ+ people from around the world descend on Israel; the only place in the Middle East where Jews and LGBTQ+ people are treated with dignity and respect.

Sadly, I have never made it to Tel Aviv Pride, but one of my closest friends went in 2019 and I spoke to him to understand his perceptions of LGBTQ+ pride in the Jewish state. Grant Thomson, a non-Jewish gay man who lives in London, told me:

> I went to Pride in Tel Aviv to celebrate being gay and to be part of an incredible community of diverse people. It was so meaningful to experience pride in Israel, a country that brings together many people from around the world to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ people are persecuted all over the rest of the Middle East and travelling to Israel to celebrate my community felt defiant and made me feel powerful.

That the wider LGBTQ+ community has not bought into the anti-semitic lies of many of the left gives me a huge amount of hope that there can once again be a fusion of my two identities.

Despite the tension that may exist between my two communities, I am determined to remain fearlessly proud of both my identities and create space for them to come together – and, in all honesty, I have to be. What choice do I have? I cannot change my sexuality nor my Jewishness, so I must create a space for both to coexist. One way that I have found to help realign my two identities is by exploring the concept of pride and searching for similarities, rather than focusing on their differences or their areas of conflict. The concept of pride has helped me to not only become more comfortable with my sexuality, but to celebrate it. So, I ask: how can I apply this notion of pride to

my Jewish identity? However, to answer this, we first need to better understand identity itself.

IDENTITY

Before we examine the idea of pride in identity, we need to try and examine what identity is and how it is formed. It is important to recognise that the question of identity is a fairly modern one. For example, while having existed since the dawn of time, the idea of LGBTQ+ identity was only formed in the 19th century.

Therefore, when we discuss identity, in some ways we are imposing a modern idea onto historical figures or communities. This can be problematic, particularly if modern definitions do not really fit historical contexts, and it is thus paramount to always understand the historical context of a specific situation before we begin to understand it from a modern context.

We also have to recognise that identity is immensely complex. In a Stanford University draft paper, James D Fearon, a professor of political science, argues that identity 'proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings'.[5] In his paper, Fearon recognises two different perspectives of identity. One is personal and the other is social, so, therefore, 'it refers at the same time to social categories and to the sources of an individual's self-respect or dignity'.[6]

The reason why identity is important, particularly when you are a minority, is that defining your own identity is to state your personal and communal right to self-determination. It ensures the fusion of your personal and social external identities. While outside forces do influence how we see ourselves, allowing others to define who we are does not result in a healthy or happy individual or community. Additionally, from a societal perspective, this often results in tropes and stereotypes being formed around a group that has no bearing in reality – as it does in the case of the Jews.

While there is no one definition of identity, I believe we can loosely and simply understand it to be the formation of understanding the different components that make up one's ideas of the self, based on asking the following questions:

'Who am I?'

'Where did I come from?'

'Where do I fit in?'

'How do I fit in?'

For example, in my case, I am a British, gay, Jewish man whose family fled to the UK from eastern Europe, where they lived as a subjugated people following their expulsion from their indigenous homeland, Israel. This self-identification rejects the non-Jewish world's idea of what it means to be a Jew and allows me as an individual, and as a member of a collective, to define my own story.

Through our journey on Jewish Pride, we will explore the historical formation of Jewish identity, often in the face of intense antisemitism. It is true that identity can be formed – or rather questions can be asked which lead to the formation of identity – based on rejection by wider society. So, for example, Jewish identity is an issue we grapple with, partly because the non-Jewish world has rejected us and we want to define how we see ourselves.

PRIDE

While exploring Jewish Pride, I came across these words by Britain's former chief rabbi, the late Lord Sacks: 'At some stage, Jews stopped defining themselves by the reflection they saw in the eyes of God and started defining themselves by the reflection they saw in the eyes of their Gentile neighbours.'[7] I think this is true, especially when I see

the aggressive rejection of Zionism by young progressive Jews, who do not understand their own history and base their role in the modern progressive movement on the perspectives and values of the non-Jewish, often antisemitic, world.

Michael Lerner, the rabbi and political activist, addressed this specific issue in 1993 when he wrote a piece in the *Village Voice* magazine, which argued: 'Lecturing on campuses around the U.S. as editor of *Tikkun*, a progressive Jewish journal, I've met thousands of young Jews who never learned or have conveniently forgotten the realities of their own history.'[8] What Lerner is suggesting is that certain young progressive light-skinned Jews have forgotten the cyclical nature of violent antisemitism faced by their own ancestors and have started seeing themselves as privileged white people whose only role in the progressive world is to support other communities in their fights against oppression.

The question I want to ask at this stage is: how do we define our own identity, *not* through non-Jewish eyes or even through God's, but through our own? How do we create a Jewish Pride movement that defines our own identity in our own terms?

It is important to recognise that some expressions of pride are warped and aim to exclude others. The ADL (Anti-Defamation League) defines 'white pride', for example, as 'a white supremacist slogan appropriated from expressions of ethnic pride by various minority groups in the United States. White supremacists often use the slogan, or variations thereof, to deny any racism on their part, claiming that they are merely exhibiting white pride.'[9] I firmly reject the idea that any expression of pride in oneself should lead to the denigration of another. Stonewall, the British LGBTQ+ rights organisation, defines pride as: 'Pride is about communities coming together in celebration, protest, unity and solidarity.'[10] To me, this is what pride should be about; it has no relationship or impact on any other community.

MINORITY IDENTITIES

As the brief explorations of my own identity demonstrates, identity is complex and each of us has at least two; our internal identity as well as the identity imposed on us by the world, or as Fearon suggested, our 'personal' and 'social' identities.[11] Sometimes they align but not always. My own experience suggests that your internal identity having an impact upon your external identity is generally a good thing. The world sees you as you see yourself. However, issues may arise when your external identity has an impact upon your internal identity.

This is certainly true of minority groups. The impact of prejudice on mental health in the LGBTQ+ community is well documented, with LGBTQ+ teenagers being four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts.[12] Trauma caused by prejudice has an impact upon many communities in different ways. In some cases, bigoted societal perceptions of your identities can lead to changes in physiology that can be passed on through the generations. Trauma related to prejudice can be inherited through changes in gene expression, as evidenced through the science and study known as epigenetics. This physiological inheritance of trauma is visible in several groups, including Holocaust survivors.

As a 2015 study, for instance, revealed: 'Genetic changes stemming from the trauma suffered by Holocaust survivors are capable of being passed on to their children, the clearest sign yet that one person's life experience can affect subsequent generations.'[13] Descendants of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust clearly suffer from intergenerational trauma. This is also the case for the majority of Jewish people whose families and ancestors have fled antisemitic murder for thousands of years.

In her book, *Wounds Into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma,* Dr Tirzah Firestone, a rabbi and a psychotherapist, describes intergenerational trauma as 'the residue of our ancestors' overwhelming stresses and life events that they couldn't metabolize in their lifetimes, such as the Holocaust or fleeing persecution. It happens on the individual and also on the collective level. And collective Jewish memories are in overdrive these days with the rise of antisemitism.'[14]

Firestone explores an interesting point about the Jewish experience, something I touched on previously. Due to both historical and modern antisemitism, Jews are forced to deal with collective intergenerational trauma based on our past but also collective and individual trauma based on our present circumstances.

In March 2020, I began planning the last class of my three-month course on the Holocaust, which explores post-Holocaust antisemitism. I broke down in tears; I felt distressed, overwhelmed and hopeless that a class on the destruction of 6 million Jews had to end with lessons on modern antisemitism.

While I've always been proud of being Jewish, there was a time in my life, particularly at university, when I was extremely nervous about telling people that I was Jewish. I would not say that I was ashamed, but I definitely felt elements of shame. I remember I met one of my closest friends on the first day of university in September 2005. We attended a politics tutorial together and we went for a coffee afterwards. Fifteen years on, when we were chatting about this very book, he reminded me of how I told him I was Jewish. He recalled that before I told him I hesitated and seemed nervous. He was right, I was nervous. I was bracing for impact, as I often did when I told people I am Jewish. This is unacceptable. It is unacceptable that I should be scared to tell someone that I am Jewish, particularly in a setting that was clearly non-violent. It is true that you cannot control how people react to you, and you always have to be mindful of your safety, but to be afraid of telling people who you really are is a terrible and sad reflection of deeply embedded societal prejudice.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This is not a book about combating antisemitism. The tragic reality is that, more often than not, minority groups cannot influence societal perceptions of them and it is not their responsibility to 'fix' skewed perceptions of their community. Antisemitism is *not* a Jewish problem; it is a non-Jewish problem that has an impact upon Jews. I have learned from years of fighting antisemitism that there is little we can do to combat it on a societal or global level, although we are able to have a dialogue and share our experiences. However, if antisemitism is ever to be eradicated, then it is the non-Jewish world who must embark upon that task. What we *are* able to influence is how we feel about ourselves. The question ultimately is: how can we feel pride in our internal identities when society imposes an external identity upon us that does not relate to the truth of who we are?

This book is ultimately about my attempt to draw from my experiences in the LGBTQ+ community, while exploring and understanding Jewish identities in order to consider how we build a Jewish Pride movement. To me, a Jewish Pride movement is about creating an inclusive Jewish community that represents all its members, draws boundaries on antisemitism, and creates a culture of empowerment so Jewish people never again feel ashamed of their Jewishness.

To my Jewish readers: when reading this, I want you to feel educated, empowered and inspired. I want you to feel proud of and connected to our incredible and diverse community and I want you to feel that you belong. Please also know that your distress over antisemitism is valid. You are allowed to feel frustrated, rejected and dejected about both historical and current levels of antisemitism. You are allowed to point out anti-Jewish racism wherever and whenever you see it. No one should tell you otherwise. I also want you to think about your own expressions of Jewish Pride. Not everyone will express this idea

in the same way, it is both communal *and* personal, and it is vital for our mental health and self-esteem.

To my non-Jewish readers: when reading this I would like you to do a few things. The first is to recognise the specific historical and current realities of antisemitism and to understand that it is *just* as dangerous and harmful as any other form of prejudice. Jews desperately need your support. Please also consider how Jews and antisemitism are so often erased and not even recognised in discussions on prejudice. Please acknowledge that antisemitism is an institutional form of prejudice that requires real work in dismantling it. Please allow Jews to place ourselves at the centre of our own stories and experiences. In short, please work to combat antisemitism and support us as we build a Jewish Pride movement.

Lastly, please consider your own identities and whether you feel pride in them. While I am writing about my own experiences as a gay Jewish man, these issues are not specific to just Jewish or gay people. We all have an external identity imposed on us and we all need to feel proud of who we are.

WHO ARE THE JEWS?

Before we start exploring Jewish Pride, let us first explore who are the Jews. I am an educator, so when teaching I always try to start from the beginning of the story I am trying to tell. Context is so important for us to be able to understand our world – and this story is no different.

The Jewish people are an ethno-religious group. Due to misunderstanding, which often results in Jewish identity being erased through Erasive Antisemitism[15], Jews are often mischaracterised as *just* a religion or a race – which, when considering Jewish history, are inaccurate reflections of what it means to be Jewish.

The story of the Jews is extraordinary, and one that began in the Middle East thousands of years ago. The Jewish people originated before the advent of Judaism, the religion, in the second millennium BCE. For the next 2,000 years, Jewish people lived in the Middle East as part of Jewish tribes, independent Jewish states (Israel and Judea) and in Diasporic communities formed through invasions, wars and colonisation.

While the idea of a Jewish Diaspora developed gradually after the first colonisation of the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in around 720 BCE, it took on a new face following the defeat of Jewish resistance fighters by the Romans in the first centuries of the new millennium. It was at this time that the Jews became a 'wholly diasporic people'.[16] It is worth noting that while the non-Jewish world and secular society talk about the Diaspora, Jews traditionally refer to this period as the Galut (or exile), which more accurately represents the Jewish reality of this time period. These colonisations ultimately resulted in the destruction of a Jewish homeland and the dispersal of the Jewish people. This is of vital importance: the Jews only left their homeland en masse because they were forced to do so.

In the Middle Ages, due to geographical separation, sub-ethnic Jewish groups began to form, and these communities eventually settled in their respective regions and developed distinct cultures. However, an incredible thing about the Jewish people has been our continuity. A distinct Jewish identity, nation, tradition and language have survived to this very day, despite our exile and separation from one another. That is not to say, of course, that there have not been enormous shifts and diverse branches in Jewish culture and practice; however, the threads of continuity that bind every single Jew from throughout history are still strong and powerful.

As the journalist and commentator Charles Krauthammer argued in an article in the *Washington Examiner* in 1998: 'Israel is the very embodiment of Jewish continuity: It is the only nation on earth

that inhabits the same land, bears the same name, speaks the same language, and worships the same God that it did 3,000 years ago. You dig the soil and you find pottery from Davidic times, coins from Bar Kokhba, and 2,000-year-old scrolls written in a script remarkably like the one that today advertises ice cream at the corner candy store.'[17]

There are currently around 14.7 million Jewish people in the world, we make up just 0.2% of the world's 7.59 billion people – and, for such a tiny community, it may come as a surprise to you that it is incredibly diverse. Due to multiple expulsions from the Jewish indigenous homeland of Israel, four main Diasporic Jewish communities historically emerged. These are Ashkenazi (Jews who settled in central and eastern Europe); Beta-Yisrael (Ethiopian Jews); Mizrahi (Jews who never left the Middle East or North Africa); and Sephardic (Jews who settled in the Iberian Peninsula and then later, due to expulsion, spread through the Mediterranean, parts of Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans). Due to migration patterns in the long and complicated history of the Jewish people, it is important to note that there are also smaller Jewish communities in several countries including India, Hong Kong and China. Furthermore, there are inter-ethnic Jewish communities and individuals that have grown out of more modern mixed couplings due to Diasporic migration, which has made our community even more diverse. Various branches of Judaism have also opened up pathways for more people to choose to become Jewish. Each of these communities are important and must be included as part of our Jewish Pride movement.

Due to our status as an ethno-religion and a nation, there are two routes to Jewishness. According to most mainstream Jewish streams, you can either be born Jewish or you can convert to Judaism. In terms of those who are born Jewish, Orthodox Judaism states that you have to have a Jewish mother to be counted as a Jew, while Liberal Judaism says that either of your parents can be Jewish for you to be considered

Jewish. For the purposes of this book, I define anyone who has either a Jewish mother or father as 'being born Jewish'.

Additionally, it is important to note that Jews by choice – like Ruth, the Biblical heroine – are absolutely and fully recognised as Jews, and are just as important to our peoplehood as someone who is born Jewish. While they join our nation specifically through the religion, Jews by choice become full members of the Jewish people once they have converted – and this should never be questioned.

These two routes to Jewishness add an interesting dynamic to the issue of who is and who is not considered Jewish. Although there is a clear religious element – and as it is possible to convert into the people – there are also many Jews who share traceable common ancestry. As a 2010 study published in the American Journal stated: 'The studied Jewish populations represent a series of geographical isolates or clusters with genetic threads that weave them together. These threads are observed as IBD (Identity By Descent) segments that are shared within and between Jewish groups. Over the past 3,000 years, both the flow of genes and the flow of religious and cultural ideas have contributed to Jewishness.'[18]

An explanation as to why Jewish ancestry can be traced is due in large part to what is called endogamy. For most of our history – and for a variety of reasons, including antisemitism as well as religious practice – Jewish communities were isolated. Therefore, for the most part, we have historically married and reproduced within our own community, until more recent times, when isolation of the Jewish people has lessened.

The concept of shared ancestry is complicated and can – and has – been manipulated to demonise Jewish people, as we will explore in the next chapter, so it must be discussed carefully. However, it is also crucial to recognise the existence of shared ancestry because it is also a part of our reality. Light-skinned Jews – most commonly Ashkenazi Jews – often have their indigeneity to the Levant erased.

As such, traceable shared ancestry is incredibly useful to helping those born Jewish understand their roots and their origins. It can also shed more light on how specific diseases impact Jewish groups as well as helping us understand intergenerational trauma, the study of epigenetics. Antisemitism has left genetic, as well as psychological, scars that impact all Jews who share ancestry, and recognising that is vital to understanding their lived and historical experience.

While we must recognise the realities of Jewish shared ancestry, we must also acknowledge that it is one piece of a larger puzzle and is not the be-all and end-all of Jewish identity. Similarly, it is vitally important that it is not used to place a hierarchy on Jewishness that ultimately diminishes the Jewishness of Jews by choice.

When discussing Jewish stories, there are, unfortunately, those who only refer to Ashkenazi Jews and their experiences and who view Ashkenazi Jews as the 'default Jews'. This erases other Jewish experiences, such as Mizrahi, Sephardic, Beta-Yisrael or other. This is known as 'Ashkenormativity' and it is a real issue that we must address when seeking to rebuild our People. While this is damaging, we must seek to understand its context, and as such we must recognise that in the Jewish Diaspora (i.e. outside of Israel) it is not always deliberate – after all, 75% of the world's Jewish population is Ashkenazi[19] – and addressing this imbalance should never lead to a demonisation of Ashkenazi Jews or a misunderstanding of their experience in the non-Jewish world. It is also important not to use Ashkenazi as a synonym for white-passing or light skinned. Many Ashkenazi Jews do not pass as white, and this inaccuracy serves to erase the realities of all of our experiences. It is also important to understand that Diasporic Ashkenormativity is very different to the real and systemic inequality experienced by Mizrahi Jews and Beta-Yisrael in Israel which we will address later in this book. We must address *both* Diasporic Ashkenormativity and different forms of inequality in Israel because Jewish Pride must be based on a celebration of Jewish diversity and inclusion

that represents *all* Jewish communities. This is a vital part of working towards a Jewish Pride movement, which is why I have consciously included a diverse collection of Jewish stories to represent us and open the doors of discussion.

Despite a long and complex history, Jewish people – regardless of where we have settled or emerged – are deeply and intrinsically connected, and all Jews today represent a thread within the tapestry of our people.

One of the more tragic threads that bind us together is that Jewish people have endured thousands of years of continuous and intense persecution. To offer brief, non-exhaustive snapshots of the length and breadth of antisemitism in history: note that Jews were oppressed by Antiochus IV, a Hellenistic king, more than 150 years before the birth of Christ. In 1066, 5,000 Jews were murdered during the Granada Pogrom. King Edward I expelled the Jews from England in 1290. In the 15th century, Emperor Yeshaq of Ethiopia, invaded the Jews' autonomous region and forced them to convert to Christianity or face losing their lands. Jews in Spain and Portugal faced cultural genocide at the end of the 15th century. The Jews of eastern Europe were violently persecuted by Tsar Alexander III who implemented the repressive May Laws of 1882 and launched the subsequent pogroms which saw millions of Jews murdered or fleeing for their lives. During the 1940s, Jews were subject to genocidal antisemitism at the hands of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, which culminated in the Holocaust and the total annihilation of 6 million Jews.

Antisemitism did not end with the Holocaust and even after the Shoah, Jews have continued to be oppressed and persecuted. Already classed as second-class *dhimmis* – a form of subjugation disguised as protection – 856,000 Jews were expelled in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s from Middle Eastern countries where they have lived for thousands of years. In the postwar period, too, the leadership of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc demonised Jews as 'rootless cosmopolitans', while

inflicting upon them intense oppression, violence, jailing and assassinations, and refusing them the right to move to the safety of Israel.

Jews continue to be oppressed to this very day; all over the world, they currently fear the resurgence of antisemitic populist parties, while witnessing more harassment, rejection and violence. Antisemitism has existed in every society where Jews live (and in many where they do not due to the popularity of antisemitic conspiracy fantasies), whether that is in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, Australasia or the Americas.

Antisemitism is more than just legal restrictions or genocide. It is, in fact, more than the hatred or mistrust of individual Jewish people. It is an institutional, deeply ingrained and systemic form of hatred. It is a worldview, an idea, that has created a fantastical version of the Jew – based upon antisemitic tropes that we will explore later – that bears *no* relationship with reality.

Once again, *antisemitism is not a Jewish problem.* It is a non-Jewish problem that unfortunately impacts Jews. Jewish people cannot control the non-Jewish external perception of what it means to be a Jew. However, as Lord Sacks said, we must stop defining ourselves in the eyes of our neighbours. We must begin defining ourselves through our own understanding of what it means to be a Jew while we celebrate our Jewish identities.

Jewish Pride is the movement that attempts to do just this.