



Jews and the property question

Good things come in twos, apparently. Which is why those who live in London get to choose between the London Jewish Cultural Centre (LJCC) and the Jewish Community Centre for London (JCCL).

The LJCC provides courses, book readings, films and lectures at its new Hampstead building.

The JCCL, meanwhile, offers edgier cultural/community events to the (largely) unaffiliated, although they'd like you to hang out if you're affiliated, too. It doesn't have a building yet – it's working on it – but it's planning a gym, too.

We like the gym.

But it's a little like a Chelm story, no? To an outsider it must look like the first line of a Jewish joke. Overdo the whisky and you won't be able to tell your Js from your Cs.

There's the old joke about the Jewish man rescued from a desert island who, when asked what the three buildings are, replies, 'That's my home, and that's my shul.' And the other building? 'Oh, that's the shul I don't go to.'

I just heard that the United Synagogue's South Hampstead shul is getting into the building game; it is building a community centre with a gym. Or is it a pool?

The Manor House site in East Finchley (which houses a Masorti synagogue, Reform Synagogues of Great Britain Head Office and Akiva School) finally got planning permission to redevelop.

Even before we get to *new* cultural/community centres, there's Harold House in Live rpool and Sinclair House in Redbridge, although to my knowledge neither of them has a pool.

For a wandering people we have become peculiarly attached to property, despite knowing that we can't take it with us, even if they're probably not out to get us. It's certainly true that cultural Jews need a place to call home. In fact, since the Middle Ages there's been a tendency to build clusters of shuls wherever there are Jews of all shades and flavour. Even if some synagogue-founding is *broigus*-induced.

When you look at the areas formerly settled by Jews, the old buildings have been repurposed. My great-grandparent's shul on Cheetham Hill Road is a bathroom wholesaler; London's old East End shuls are

largely mosques or Hindu community centres now. Imagine the irony if it turns out the obvious place to site the new JCC building is where the hip kids live now: the Spitalfields, in the East End.

Don't get me wrong: I feel like I'm living in an Anglo-Jewish cultural renaissance. I love the thoughtful innovation of the JCCL events. I love the intellectual bite of the LJCC lecture programme. I love the Jewish Film Festival. I love Jewish Book Week. And I think that the creative energy around these projects has sparked a turning point in Jewish cultural life in Britain.

There are a couple of dates coming up where I have to choose between checking out Hasidic Reggae, a *Times* columnist in conversation with an *East Enders* actress and an evening of klezmer. One thing this means is I don't have to visit New York so regularly – I can get my Woody-Allen-and-chicken-soup fix without going via Heathrow, and that must be a good thing.

But I'm struck by a couple of things about this Jews-and-property shtick. Like, what is it with gyms? We've swapped the Kiddush rota for the cross-trainer, rowing in shul with the rowing machine, and it's not clear to me what's so Jewish about all this, except we may get less late-onset diabetes or heart disease. I know that some say two Jews meeting on a bus in Turkmenistan are having a Jewish experience, but I think it's just a coincidence. I'm not saying there shouldn't be Jewish gyms, or gyms Jews go to, but remember Jewish golf clubs? They were because we couldn't get into the regular ones.

I don't think that being Jewish is about how many buildings, or how big, or how contemporary. No, it isn't about bricks and mortar, but about respecting our differences (two Jews, three opinions) and creating a communal space for every kind of Jew in our wondrous, multi-faceted community to say, 'This is where I belong.' Raising money for buildings is only the beginning. The challenge is keeping them filled. 🍷

Sasha Frieze is a writer who maintains a daily weblog, recommended by the *Guardian*, at www.sashinka.blogspot.com