

## THE MAN WHO SPEAKS OUT

It is evident that Rifat Bali carries great respect in the community as its most distinguished historian. He has written 15 books on Turkish Jewish history and his articles have been published internationally. "You must see Rifat Bali," we are told, "he is wonderful." The same people tell us that he is very pessimistic and that what he writes upsets many in the community.

When we meet in the office of Libra, the publishing and library supply company Bali runs, he explains this dichotomy. "They want me to say what they do not want to say." He writes extensively about the 'rainstorms' that the community leadership plays down and also about present-day antisemitism. For Bali, "the Jewish community lives in an atmosphere of antisemitism. There is no discrimination in the workplace; there is no daubing of swastikas but there is flagrant antisemitism in the press."

Even if the Islamist trends currently threatening Turkish society do not prevail, Rifat Bali is not optimistic as he sees growing antisemitism amongst Leftists and Nationalists. Contemporary antisemitism is documented in his lucidly written and extensively researched essay 'Anti-Semitism

in Turkey' dated August 2009, available online on the website of the Institute for Global Jewish Affairs ([www.jcpa.org](http://www.jcpa.org)). In this he also presents evidence that antisemitic feelings are not confined to the politicians and fundamentalists. In *JR* January 2009, we reported on the 2008 Pew Research Centre findings on negative feelings about Jews in Europe. Spain had the highest rate (46% felt negatively); the figure was 10% in the UK and the US. Bali quotes the poll's results for same question when put in Turkey: 76%.

Bali does not feel that it will do the community any good to protest about antisemitic manifestations: "Any attempt by



the Turkish Jewish leadership to confront Turkish society on combating antisemitism is likely to backfire and even further exacerbate the problem."

In Bali's view, to work with the Government in promoting the positive aspects of their treatment of Jews is to collude in the country's attempt to present itself as a place in which the rights of minorities are respected – unacceptable, he believes, in view of their record, particularly the denial of the Armenian genocide.

Bali feels the Jewish community leads a double life – not wanting to risk being seen as disloyal to Turkish society by expressing any sympathy with Israel – and yet wanting to instil a Jewish identity in its young people.

However, Rifat Bali has no solutions to offer the Jewish community in Turkey other than to continue to live with antisemitism or to emigrate.

Thinking about those we have met or heard about during our visit; about a Limmud that attracted 1,000 people, a thriving weekly newspaper whose 20 volunteers meet every weekend; about the beaming ladies serving doughnuts at a Chanukah service, our impression is that the community is thriving and has no intention of giving up.

But then I am an optimist.

See [www.rifatbali.com](http://www.rifatbali.com) for links to articles