Is There a Future For French Jewry?

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Of the countries hardest hit by the current outbreak of anti-Semitism in Europe, France poses a particular dilemma. For contrary to much of what is said today about anti-Jewish sentiment in France, its roots are to be found not in any specific Israeli policy with respect to the Palestinians. Rather, they lie deep within the French body politic. For this reason, it is a profound error to argue, as many have, that the problem will be resolved through a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, or that any of the conventional methods—such as increased law enforcement or public-awareness campaigns—will succeed in defeating it. Indeed, the current outbreak of anti-Semitism in France is little more than a symptom of a far deeper crisis confronting French Jewry.

To understand the problem of Jewish life in France today, we must recall that political Zionism was itself conceived in Paris. As a young reporter covering the Dreyfus Affair in 1894, Theodor Herzl saw clearly how untenable was the condition of the Jew in modern Europe. For the Emancipation, he understood, had been only a partial solution to the Jewish problem: It had granted Jews full civil rights, but did not secure their future as a religious, national, or ethnic collective. In other words, it had made room for the Jewish individual, but not for Jewish peoplehood.
The anti-Semitism that Herzl witnessed in France was thus not the return of a repressed, pre-Enlightenment hatred, but a problem that was intimately connected with the Enlightenment itself. Thus could Alfred Dreyfus, the individual, the loyal French citizen, be suspected of belonging secretly to an international Jewish brotherhood—a collective that had been rejected by the Emancipation. It was, indeed, the Emancipation which had delegitimized the classic communal affiliation of French Jewry. Like the French prelate Abbé Grégoire (1750-1831), a vocal advocate of Jewish emancipation, the emancipators saw in Judaism no more than a “cesspool of human delirium,” “rabbinic mumbo jumbo,” and an “extensive collection of errors and balderdash.” Believing themselves compassionate, they went so far as to accuse Europe of the crime of reducing individual Jews to their abject Jewishness: “It is the height of injustice,” wrote one public figure at the time of the French Revolution, “to reproach the Jews for the crime that we force them to commit.” The human being in the Jew must be saved, they insisted, because, as Grégoire wrote, “they are men like us; they are this before they are Jews.” In reality, then, emancipation as citizens was not emancipation of Jews as such. It was rather the emancipation of the Jew as a human being who had been imprisoned within the Jewish collective, driven through his degradation in Europe to embrace a religion of spiritual and intellectual inferiority. To the Enlightenment thinkers, Jewish peoplehood was a kind of metaphysical ghetto from which the individual Jew must be liberated.

To Herzl, then, the Dreyfus Affair did more than divide France between anti-Semites and anti-racists. It confirmed that the Jewish condition was not merely a humanitarian issue, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a political one. For the legitimacy of Jewish nationhood was itself on trial. Thus Herzl's politicization of the Jewish problem was in fact his most critical achievement, a much-needed rejoinder to the depoliticization of the Jewish condition brought about by the Emancipation. Herzl understood that without political sovereignty, the survival of the Jewish people would be forever at risk.
Sixty years after the Holocaust, Herzl’s claim is once again being put to the test in France. Facing accusations of disloyalty to the republic reminiscent of the Dreyfus Affair, French Jews have once again begun to ask whether their status as full French citizens really rests on firm ground. This question was especially acute during the first half of 2001, when the new wave of anti-Semitic violence in France was met with silence on the part of government officials, the media, and even the Jewish leadership. Their concern is justified. If in the 1960s and 1970s French culture was generally hospitable to a variety of identities, over the last generation France’s political culture has changed dramatically. So, too, has the French understanding of the role that ethnic and religious communities play in that culture evolved, to the point where the conditions upon which Jewish communal life in France was based may no longer obtain. The Jews of France have changed as well: Today, they possess a far greater sense of collective self-assertion than in the past, which puts them squarely at odds with the prevailing political ideology of the French republic. These developments, combined with the rise of a powerful Arab voice in French public life, have begun to raise serious doubts as to whether there is any future at all for Jewish communal life in France.

II

The political emancipation of the Jews in the nineteenth century was supposed to bring about the disappearance of anti-Semitism. By gaining equal rights as individuals at the cost of their identification with the Jewish people, Jews would be regarded as citizens like all others. Yet, instead of disappearing, anti-Semitism reappeared in an entirely new form. Now, it was aimed at the new Jewish citizen, who stood accused of hiding subversive goals behind his formal individuality. Because Jewish
peoplehood could never really be erased in fact, the Jews came to be perceived by democratic society as a secretive, shameful people who, because they were not recognized and had no formal existence, must have hidden conspiratorial, dominating, corrupting goals. Then as now, Jewish peoplehood was identified with Jewish conspiracy.

This kind of anti-Semitism is exclusively modern. It is, in fact, an inherent aspect of modernity, as its incessant return in Europe attests. Its significance is twofold. First, it implies the inevitable failure of any model of Jewish emancipation that does not make room for Jewish collective identification. Second, it suggests the ineffaceable historic reality of Jewish peoplehood, in spite of all the best efforts of enlightened Jews and non-Jews alike to bring about its demise. Indeed, it was precisely because of Herzl's awareness that the Emancipation had not brought an end to Jewish peoplehood that political Zionism's pièce de résistance, the State of Israel, would become, over the last half century, the central rallying point for the majority of Jews worldwide. And although this majority still lives in the Diaspora, it nonetheless looks to Israel as an affirmation of the Jewish collective identity in a post-Holocaust world, and as the practical and moral basis of its continuity. Jews today, by and large, understand that they will not find a stable solution to anti-Semitism merely by fighting it, and even less so by denying their collective identity. Rather, such a solution is to be found only in political sovereignty.

The French political tradition in particular provided the most radical of modern political challenges to the legitimacy of the Jewish claim to peoplehood. Dating from the pre-Revolutionary absolutist monarchy, French politics has always been extremely centralized. The Revolution only reinforced this tendency with the triumph of the centralist Jacobins over the Girondins, who advocated a province-based system. This staunchly anti-federalist political culture is the result of the fact that the French nation, which had previously taken the form of provinces and disparate cultures, was forged by the state, which was at first monarchical and then republican. In Germany,
by contrast, it was a pre-existing cultural nation that found political expression in the creation of the state.

In becoming French citizens, then, Jews became French people of Jewish—or “Israelite” or “Mosaic”—persuasion; that is, individual citizens who identified with no collective other than France itself. This new citizenship was intended to sever all ties with a broader Jewish people, or even a coherent Jewish “community” in France. “The plan which we are developing,” wrote Abbé Grégoire, “entails the dissolution of Jewish communities.” Since this condition could not be effected by fiat, however, a centralized institutional structure was developed that reflected the Jews’ new status while preserving their rights to practice Judaism as individual citizens. Napoleon obligated all French Jews to belong to a single government institution, known as the Central Consistory of France, which standardized all aspects of Jewish life, including worship, education, and clerical functions.

The effect of this, however, was not to eliminate Jewish communal affiliation, but to redefine it through a centralized state institution. The Jews, moreover, succeeded throughout the nineteenth century in maintaining their loyalty—albeit “ethnic” and not “political”—to their brethren in other countries under a philanthropic veneer. Thus a bizarre contradiction emerged between the official aims of the Emancipation and the actual institutions which governed Jewish life in its wake, a discord that was perhaps best expressed in the establishment in 1860 of the first worldwide Jewish institution, the Alliance Israélite Universelle (Universal Jewish Alliance), dedicated to fighting the persecution of Jews all over the world—except, that is, in France, where Jews were first and foremost French citizens, and thus theoretically immune to anti-Semitic aggression. Moreover, while the Alliance accepted the Emancipation’s premise that there was no such thing as a Jewish “community” in France, it nonetheless assumed the existence of such a people around the world.

This contradiction formed the basis of Jewish life in France until World War II. It was then that the Vichy regime, and the Holocaust more broadly,
revealed the horrific consequences of relying too heavily on an individualistic model of emancipation. Indeed, the Holocaust's impact on the notion of Jewish citizenship in France was immeasurable. Jewish identity in European nation states, and especially in France, had for over a century been organized around individual citizenship, combined with a clear renunciation of Jewish peoplehood. During World War I, for example, it was not unheard-of for nationalistic German Jews to find themselves fighting against nationalistic French Jews on the battlefield. With Nazism, however, Jewish citizens of many countries were thrown together in death camps with the aim of bringing about their collective extermination—a single people, unrecognized and unclaimed by all of Europe. Thus did Xavier Vallat, the Vichy commissioner of Jewish affairs, declare that Jews were “a foreign people” within the French nation—a status that necessitated their wholesale exclusion under Vichy’s racist laws. Overnight, it seemed, Jews ceased to be emancipated citizens of their native countries and were transformed into nationals of a people in whose very existence many of them had long ago stopped believing.

In the wake of the Holocaust, French Jews could no longer accept the structural ambiguity that had previously defined Jewish life. During the war, the Vichy regime had disowned them and deported thousands to Auschwitz. On account of their involvement in the French Resistance, however, and as a result of assistance from a large segment of France’s civilian population, four-fifths of French Jews survived. As in the Dreyfus Affair, postwar France was divided on the Jewish question: Although some Jews changed their names in an attempt to distance themselves from Judaism, there nevertheless remained a strong and vocal contingent which determined to lay the foundations of a new French Jewish identity—one which, unlike its predecessors, would no longer deny Jewish peoplehood. Their goal was revolutionary: With few exceptions, there had been no officially recognized “Jewish community” in France since the Emancipation. They intended to change that.
The idea of a more robust Jewish collective understanding put forth in postwar France presumed an identity that went beyond the scope of a religious organization like the Consistory. The result was the Representative Council of French Jewry (later changed to the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions, or CRIF), which emerged from among the Jewish leadership of the Resistance. Unlike the Consistory, which had been created by the Napoleonic state and imposed on its Jewish citizens from above, with CRIF the Jews had created a semi-grassroots, representative body that would deal directly with the new regime. (Significantly, however, until 1982 the president of the Consistory also served as president of CRIF, thereby maintaining a connection with the earlier, Napoleonic state structure.) Jewish community centers also emerged after the war, offering an additional venue for Jewish cultural, rather than religious, identification. Finally, these developments were accompanied by the emergence of a new school of Jewish thought, the “Paris school,” which brought together intellectuals like André Neher, Léon Ashkenazi, Emmanuel Levinas, and Eliane Amado-Levy-Valensi, who attempted to forge an identity that simultaneously affirmed the universal and the particular, the secular and the religious. This new philosophy referred openly to the notion of “Jewish community” and confirmed the historic destiny of the Jews and the State of Israel, while at the same time bringing Jewish identity into dialogue with Western thought.\(^6\) This innovative model of Jewishness, grounded in self-affirmation yet nonetheless based on the country’s centralist foundations, encountered so little resistance in French society at the time that it appeared to be a permanent acquisition.

Why was the French public in the postwar period willing to accept this new Jewish identity? A number of reasons come to mind. First,
postwar France was in a state of ruin, and its citizens were far too distracted to be troubled by questions of Jewish identity. Second, for all intents and purposes, traditional France was at the time all but dead: The Marshall Plan was transforming France into a burgeoning consumer society, marked by industrialization, urbanization, and rural depopulation. Finally, after the Vichy government’s treatment of the Jews, the French public considered it only natural that they would seek comfort in communal affirmation.

With time, the Jewish demand for a deeper sense of communal affiliation only accelerated—especially with the immigration of North African Jews in the 1950s and 1960s. The largest contingent (nearly 140,000) came from Algeria, where Jews had been declared French citizens in 1870—long before France’s non-Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Yet Algerian Jews, unlike their French counterparts, had been living in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society, and as such had preserved an ongoing dedication to Jewish peoplehood. Moreover, they had for years acted as intermediaries between French authorities and the local population, which strengthened both their integration into French-Algerian society and their specifically Jewish identity. In the 1950s, a large contingent of Tunisian Jews immigrated to France, many of whom also had prior French citizenship, as well as a number of Moroccan Jews, who despite their relatively small size quickly gained influence in France’s Jewish institutions.

This North African element, with its history of powerful communal identification, emboldened further the character of the French Jewish community. When, for example, the Six Day War broke out in 1967, French Jews took to the streets en masse to oppose government policy toward Israel in a bold display of political vitality. This provoked Charles de Gaulle’s description of the Jews as a “self-assured and dominating” people, and coincided with the end of France’s pro-Israel policy. Then, in May 1968, striking students, joined by millions of French workers, took to the streets of Paris to protest what they viewed as a “police state,” run by officials whom they compared to the Nazi SS. Although the revolt failed to achieve actual
change in the regime, it nonetheless had immeasurable consequences for public life in France, in that it radically undermined the authority of the centralized state.

The student revolt proved to be a turning point for the Jewish community as well. Indeed, many of the movement’s leaders were Jews. It is little surprise, then, that during the revolt, Jewish revolutionary students occupied the Consistory building in Paris, a symbol of traditional French political culture. But by attacking in effigy the authority of the Consistory system, the students also challenged the unity of French Jewry. The very notion of a single French “Jewish community” was implicitly called into question by the younger generation of Jews themselves.

The next twenty years witnessed a dramatic shift in French politics, which were increasingly infused with pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionist sentiment. The problems of French Jewry were further compounded by the emigration of the Paris School thinkers (with the notable exception of Levinas) to Israel after the Six Day War—effectively terminating the philosophical effort to find room for a Jewish collective identity within a universal frame of reference. Although it is true that, by the late 1970s, a new generation of Jewish writers born after World War II arrived on the literary and philosophical scene, it was no longer the Paris School’s ideas that guided them. These new thinkers were not concerned with the moral and spiritual elements of Judaism, and focused instead on symbolic, linguistic, and aesthetic issues. In the end, the Paris School’s ideas did not survive the tremendous challenge posed by Zionism to French Jewry after the Six Day War. Even the dominant Levinassian current was reduced to a pristine sort of moralism, detached from reality and alien to politics, signifying a regression of French Jewish identity to neo-Kantian rationalism and of Jewish ethics to humanitarianism.
With the Left’s rise to power in the 1980s, humanitarianism became the dominant political ideology in France. It was then that the French Jewish community made a crucial misstep, forgoing the political neutrality that had been critical in uniting Jews of all backgrounds and political leanings, in exchange for what it perceived as increased political influence. Jews were encouraged to vote against incumbent president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing of the center-Right Union for French Democracy in favor of Socialist Party candidate François Mitterand in the 1981 presidential elections. Renouveau Juif (Jewish Revival), the movement behind the anti-d’Estaing vote, was created by Henri Hajdenberg, shortly thereafter president of CRIF, just after the October 1980 terrorist attack on the Rue Copernic synagogue in Paris, which had been (incorrectly) blamed on elements on the far Right. When Mitterand came up for reelection five years later, the Jewish community was again urged to back him on the basis of his opposition to far-Right National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. Le Pen’s importance was exaggerated dramatically by the Mitterand campaign, which sought to establish a united anti-fascist front. This strategy had proved itself prior to World War II, and Mitterand was now trying to revive support for his party among “democrats” of all persuasions.

In part, at least, French Jewry’s enlistment in the battle against Le Pen was a tactic aimed at lending credibility to Mitterand’s anti-fascist bona fides. To the Left, the Jews were the perfect victims of racism; indeed, the attack against the Rue Copernic synagogue only reinforced their image as victims. Mitterand’s Socialist Party established a popular anti-racist movement, SOS-Racisme, in collaboration with the Union of Jewish Students in France, which promoted party ideology and helped fight the National Front’s racist campaign against Arab immigrants. SOS-Racisme’s efforts were most dramatically
illustrated by its slogan, “Jews equals immigrants,” which was meant to imply that immigrants should be given the same status and protection the Jews of France had enjoyed. This slogan, however, would later come back to haunt the Jews, for they would find themselves partially blamed for the problems associated with the massive immigration of Arabs into France.

While Le Pen’s primary target was the Arab immigrant population, he also capitalized on the Jews’ symbolic importance in the French political game. At the same time, the clash with Le Pen focused new attention on the memory of the Holocaust. For years France dared not look back at the dark period of Vichy collaboration; French history focused instead on the achievements of the Resistance and of de Gaulle, who led the anti-Nazi Free French forces. Mitterand’s campaign against the “fascist threat” from Le Pen resuscitated shameful memories of the war in the collective French imagination, capitalizing on the latent sense of guilt felt by many in France. Racism against Arabs was identified with Nazism, and the call to arms against anti-Semitism provided the perfect context for the call to arms against anti-Arab racism. For the Jews, however, the results were different from what they had planned.

Thus it was, in the mid-1980s, that the trajectories of both the Jews and France came together, resulting in the resurrection of an old accusation: “Communitarianism,” or setting one’s community apart from national society. Because of the apparent similarity between Jewish and Arab-Muslim communities, the Jews were accused, together with France’s Arab immigrants, of undermining the founding ideology of the Republic. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the accusations came from the mouths of Jewish critics, who spoke of Jewish “fundamentalism.” By now, moreover, open support for Israel had become increasingly difficult for French Jews to sustain: The 1982 war in Lebanon tarnished Israel’s image and, by implication, that of the entire Jewish community. Some Israeli intellectuals visiting in France began publicly to accuse Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s government of “fascism,” a rhetorical tripwire that
severely undermined the French Jewish community’s capacity to defend the Jewish state. Internal dissension, both affirmed and exacerbated by similar discord in Israel, dealt a decisive blow to the Jewish community in France.

V

The seeds sown in the 1980s yielded bitter fruit in the 1990s. Accusations of communitarianism intensified, as did the equation of Jews with the inassimilable immigrant populations. Claims for Holocaust-era moneys, pursued by the World Jewish Congress and relayed to the authorities by French Jews, further eroded the position of the Jewish community in France, for they deepened the association in many people’s minds between the memory of the Holocaust and the Jewish demand for money, and connected the existence of an international Jewish community with disloyalty to the Republic. During this same period, residual leftist ideology from the 1970s floated to the surface in a mixture of anti-Zionism, anti-communitarianism, and the view that Jews were determined to claim a monopoly on suffering by venerating the Holocaust while at the same time obscuring the suffering of the Palestinians. A body of literature informed by this hostility to Jewish self-identification had already emerged by the mid-1990s.\(^8\)

With the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians in September 2000, the perception of Israeli criminality, the sympathy for the Palestinian violence, the belief in an American-Israeli effort to undermine the French Republic, and the emergence of a vocal and increasingly large Arab minority in France—all these combined to set off the firestorm of anti-Semitism which continues to this day. Hostility among Muslim immigrants was sustained by an undercurrent of studied indifference on the part of the rest of France. Even the official acknowledgment of growing anti-Semitism
after months of public denial failed to provoke sympathy for the Jews, who continued to be accused of communitarianism and anti-Arab racism. Israel, meanwhile, was branded an “apartheid” state, and suggestions of its elimination became increasingly legitimate in French public debate. The anti-Semitic currents of the 1980s and 1990s came together in a frenzied synergy.

Although Jews have been citizens of France for two centuries, and their religion institutionalized by Napoleon in 1807, it is not uncommon in French public discourse to hear the question asked: *Can the Jews truly be integrated into French society?* The last five years have witnessed the collapse of the foundations upon which the stability, security, and continuity of Jewish life in France were built. French political culture no longer supports the centralized institutional structure of the 1950s and 1960s, and the primary elements of Jewish collective identity—Israel and Jewish peoplehood—have come to symbolize, for many in France, the Jews’ inability to accept and abide by the republican ideal. Hence the skepticism with which the Jewish claim to French loyalty is often treated: In recent years, French Jews have been called upon to declare openly their disapproval and detachment from Israel, Ariel Sharon, and the Jewish community if they are to maintain their respectability in French society. Jewish students and teachers alike are fleeing public schools, where they perceive their physical safety and intellectual freedom to be increasingly called into question by the hostile environment created by students of immigrant origin. Observant Jews refrain from wearing the *kippa* on the streets and subways of Paris. Finally, reputable publishers feature authors who peddle theories about the murderous nature of the Jews. In much of today’s France, association with the Jewish community has become a basis for exclusion, and Zionism an unforgivable sin.

This augurs poorly for the future of Jewish life in France. For Jewish continuity is a question not only of survival, but also of a meaningful existence. One may rightfully wonder: Can there be Jewish intellectual creativity, and an authentically Jewish contribution to the public debate, under such conditions? Can Jews live as a community, but also as full citizens, if
their own right to do so is under incessant assault, not only from the immigrant population, but from the French establishment as well?

This unfavorable social climate has its counterpart in the political realm. Neither the government nor public opinion condemned the spate of anti-Semitic attacks when it began in 2001. Indeed, socialist Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine believed the attacks to be understandable in light of Israel's policies: “One shouldn’t necessarily be surprised that young French people from immigrant families feel compassion for the Palestinians and get agitated when they see what is happening.”

Then, in 2001, came the leak of a report to the Socialist Party by the researcher Pascal Boniface, who advised the party to stop courting Jews and favor the more electorally profitable Arab constituency. The resulting scandal exposed the significance of a new element in the French political landscape: An Arab-Muslim electorate, politically far more powerful than the Jews, and many times larger.

The new Muslim political force also has important implications for French foreign policy: One cannot help but see the shadow of a domestic political exigency in France’s resolutely anti-American, pro-Arab policies during the war in Iraq. The virulent strain of anti-Americanism present in French public opinion, nearly always accompanied by a fervent display of anti-Zionism, works to unite the Arab immigrants and the “French”—to the exclusion of the Jews. Deputy Minister of Urban Affairs Jean Louis Borloo unabashedly celebrated this state of affairs in 2003. “It is extraordinary how the entire immigrant community is in line with the French position,” he declared. “It is from here that we may build the future. Let us take advantage of this really wonderful new era of ‘Frenchness.’”
VI

All this leads to the conclusion that the postwar model of Jewish identity in France has simply ceased to exist, and no new model has arisen to replace it. The question must then be asked: Is Jewish renewal in France still possible? It is exceedingly difficult to answer in the affirmative. As French political culture moves ever further away from the centralized model, the possibility of a unique communal framework which will include the majority of French Jews seems increasingly remote. Religious renewal has gone in the direction of ultra-Orthodoxy, which is largely cut off from the wider Jewish community, and non-religious Jews have failed to establish institutions of cultural transmission, such as colleges, journals, or youth movements. Pro-Israel activists lack communal and institutional support. The next generation of French Jewish leadership is nowhere to be found.

Even if there were a force for Jewish renewal, its success would necessarily depend on a change in the basic political conditions in France—something that seems extremely unlikely, at least for the time being. The movement toward decentralization, combined with the trend toward European unification, has meant the continuous erosion of the authority of central bodies in France—and therefore of the political culture upon which the old model of Jewish communal identification, and communal legitimacy, was based. This erosion is further accelerated by the addition of between five million and ten million Arab immigrants to French society—a demographic shift that has paved the way for a sharp increase in anti-Semitic and anti-Israel sentiment. While French Jews know that there is little hope of a political and cultural change of heart that would legitimize their communitarian identity, they understand that any challenge to what is left of the country’s centralist tradition might result in the legitimization of the
politically powerful Arab-Muslim community. Jewish communal life in France, therefore, is in a no-win situation.

The Jews of France are rapidly approaching a crossroads. If not today, then tomorrow, they will face an impossible choice: Either they revert to the prewar model of Jewish identity, in which their peoplehood is sacrificed to an individualistic definition of Judaism, and at the same time hope that France overcomes the combined forces of decentralization and Arab communal self-assertion so as to re-establish the conditions which made this option possible in the first place; or they can affirm their Jewish peoplehood by choosing to live more complete Jewish lives somewhere other than France. One thing is certain: If they choose the latter option, the Jewish state will be there to welcome them.

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Notes


7. The Israeli sociologist Yair Oron demonstrated in a survey that one of the strongest reasons for these leaders’ political commitment was the memory of the Holocaust. Yair Oron, *We Are All German Jews* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999). [Hebrew]


