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FRENCH JEWRY FACING HAREDIZATION

Shmuel Trigano

Jewish Communal Identity in France / The Birth of Postwar Jewish Identity / The First Return to Judaism: The Paris School of Jewish Thought / The Birth of Jewish Civil Religion: 1960-1980 / Haredization in France: The Second Return to Judaism / The Consistoire vs. CRIF / The Danger of Communal Fragmentation

The direction of French Judaism since the mid-1980s has put the entire concept of Jewish identity that emerged after World War II into question. The causes of this development may be found in the evolution of French society as a whole, as well as in the evolution of world Jewry. Moreover, the weakening of modern orthodoxy and a growing process of haredization have certainly played a part. Before we can understand the consequences of this very current issue, we must first try to comprehend the nature and origins of the French model of Jewish communal identity.

Jewish Communal Identity in France

When Jews received French citizenship after the French Revolution, they received it as individuals but not as a community. Jews were recognized simply as individuals like all other citizens, without taking into account their group identity or their cultural and historical differences. There were even many speeches made at the time by leading supporters of

Jewish emancipation, viewing the issue of Jewish historical or cultural identity in quite negative terms.

As we all know, matters did not develop following the intentions proclaimed by the French Revolution. In the first place, because Napoleon wanted to build a very strong state, a police state that would know what every citizen and group was doing, he organized the Jews as a collective religious denomination, a status not exactly like that of a religion but of something lesser. Judaism was recognized as a religion in a simpler sense, as something more spiritual than the religion of a community.

The form of organization Napoleon used was the Consistoire, a system invented in France that became dominant in much of Western Europe. This emphasized the religious dimension of Judaism exclusively in the pattern of a Roman Catholic country, with a centralized institutional structure headed by a chief rabbi and a council of representatives from each of the regional consistoires. This

DANIEL J. ELAZAR, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER; ZVI R. MAROM, ASSOCIATE EDITOR; MARK AMI-EL, MANAGING EDITOR. 13 TEL-HAI ST., JERUSALEM, ISRAEL; TEL. 972-2-5619281, FAX. 972-2-5619112, INTERNET: ELAZAR@VMS.HUJI.AC.IL. IN U.S.A.: 1616 WALNUT ST., SUITE 507, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19103; TEL. (215) 204-1459, FAX. (215) 204-7784. © COPYRIGHT. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ISSN: 0792-7304.

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was the form of religion imposed upon all Jews as a collective. They had to belong to this form of religion in order to identify as Jews; there was no other option. While this situation was ambiguous, it was, in fact, a way of silent reinstatement of a Jewish community.

The Consistoire system served as the sole officially recognized, state-supported framework for French Jewry until 1905, when the separation of church and state was adopted under the Third Republic. After that time, the majority of Jews continued to voluntarily identify with consistorial Judaism.

Historians explain that the Consistoire system was a major reason why there was not a Reform movement in France, as there was in Germany or the United States, until after 1905. Actually, Reform Judaism, born in France at the beginning of the twentieth century, only really began to develop in France in the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, in spite of everything, the Jews should thank Napoleon for keeping them united for so long!

The Consistoire organization gave the Jews a collective group identity, but not in the way it was recognized in the past. Rather, many French Jews referred to their spiritual identity as "the religion of the sons of Moses" or the "Israelite religion," but avoided saying "the Jewish religion."

There was a political problem underlying this model, that of anti-Semitism. French anti-Semitism taught that Jews were a gang, a people, a group, a community that was hiding within French citizenship. Thus, Jews were attacked by anti-Semites in this unexpected way after they received their French citizenship.

Beyond the Dreyfus affair, the problem of anti-Semitism was even more clearly defined for European Jewry by Nazism. The status of the Jews under Hitlerian anti-Semitism and also under the Vichy regime involved taking away their citizenship and identifying them as some kind of Jewish race, even though the idea of race made no sense here. But it was a corollary of Nazism to identify the Jews as such a group and it was even written into the constitution of the Vichy regime that the Jews belonged to a special nationality that was not the French nationality.

The Birth of Postwar Jewish Identity

When the Jews regained French citizenship after World War II, it was clear that the prewar situation could not continue. One may claim that

only after the war did a true Jewish community arise in France. In the 1920s Jews from Eastern Europe who immigrated to France established their own organizations because they were not accepted and did not identify with the Jewish Consistoire. But they remained on the sidelines, outside of the official Jewish community. During and after the war there was a synthesis of the old consistorial system and a new form of communal organization originating in the Resistance when a new representative organization of French Jewry was established—the Conseil Représentatif des Juifs de France (CRIF).

CRIF brought together all kinds of Jews—Communists, Bundists, Zionists, and religious—in the Resistance. However, the president of CRIF was also the president of the central Consistoire, the central religious institution. Yet this was a sign of the birth of a new organization bearing a new identity, one more widely based than a religious or denominational institution. It meant the recognition of a *community* which consisted of many types of Jews, of Jewish ideologies which even competed with each other but which identified with a functional framework which was called symbolically a community (*kehilla*).

The phenomenon of *kehilla* is unusual. Prior to World War II, there were Jewish *kehillot* in countries in which the Jews did not have citizenship or in totalitarian countries. In France there was a democratic government and even though Jews wanted to belong to a collective identity there was none available. Even when CRIF embraced the Jewish community institutions outside of the synagogues, and as a result included secular dimensions of Jewish existence, it kept the Consistoire as the community's central axis. This model of consistorial Judaism can be seen in the approach to orthodox Judaism of Samson Raphael Hirsch, but it is typically French and original. Faithful to *halakhah* (Jewish law) but nevertheless flexible, the consistorial religion undertook a kind of "sanctuarization" of Judaism: its venerable reality remained untouched and the content of its customs did not change, even if certain formal modifications were introduced.

Meanwhile, the synagogues showed great flexibility with regard to the lifestyle of Jews outside the inner community. The Consistoire became the religious representative of the Algerian Jews, who had received French nationality in 1870. The organization was officially called the "Consistoire

of French and Algerian Jews." Sephardic Jews adapted to it with little difficulty. They also approved of *halakhic* flexibility. To take an illustrative example, in certain major towns in North Africa, Shabbat services were held in the early morning for those who went to work afterwards. The maintenance of religiosity made this new version of Judaism acceptable to all: the *haredim* could accept it because of its respect for *halakhah*, the reformists because it was flexible, and the non-religious because it was well integrated into the French secular regime. Consistorial Judaism consequently could find its place among the consensual symbols of Judaism.

The First Return to Judaism: The Paris School of Jewish Thought

The new postwar constitutional framework of Jewish existence was coupled with a new cultural order. A group of intellectuals (including Léon Askénazi, Emmanuel Lévinas, André Neher, and Eliane Amado) sought to redefine Judaism through the establishment of a dialogue between Judaism as it was and contemporary thought, as well as through an approach to traditional texts with midrashic and speculative methods. This school's goal was to restore interest in a universal Judaism, and to redefine the philosophical dimension in Jewish tradition. In the Holocaust, the Jews found themselves placed at the heart of the fate of modernity, which had collapsed, making them one of the main protagonists of contemporary world history. The approach of the Paris school took a direction that was to far exceed the limits of Jewish life.

The Paris school of intellectual thought was based on two institutions. Already in the Resistance there had been a leadership school within the Jewish Scouts movement which had the aim of educating a "new" Jew who could withstand the challenges of the postwar era. After the war this school was based near Paris. There, over a 20-year period, some 600-700 students studied for a year at the university, and in the evenings, on Sabbaths, and holidays they received a new kind of Jewish education. It differed from the classic rabbinic education and included philosophical content. Its aim was to rehabilitate Jewish universalism without giving up Jewish particularism. This outlook produced a whole library of Jewish thought which is, unfortunately, unknown

or overlooked both in Israel and in the United States.

In addition to the school, a second institution arose, sponsored by the World Jewish Congress, called the "Intellectual Conference of French-Speaking Jews." Every year it held a three-day conference devoted to a particular subject and published the proceedings.

There were not only religious intellectuals in this movement but also secular intellectuals—Marxists, Bundists, and Zionists—such as Vladimir Jankelevitch, Robert Mizrahi, Albert Memmi, and Vladimir Rabi, who identified with the Jewish people and its symbols, though not especially with the religion itself. This presented a very interesting phenomenon and one quite rare in those years because Marxism was so important in French intellectual circles at the time.

The importance of religion in this Jewish identity was thus ambivalent. On the one hand, the institutional religion was seen as passive, sacred, not to be touched, but flexible. On the other hand, there was an *avant-garde*, intellectualistic, and aggressive mood which wanted to do something with regard to Jewish fate, but only in speculative and ideological terms.

This school generated all the ideas and provided the intellectual tools needed to understand Jewish existence. Before that time, French Jews did not even know they had a specific intellectual identity. Yet this school also had a number of weaknesses. One major weakness was its failure to look deeply enough into the idea of politics in Judaism. When the Six-Day War broke out, most of the intellectuals could not stand up to the test. They were exposed more and more to extreme Zionism. Many identified with Gush Emunim in the 1970s. The movement exploded. Most of the intellectuals made *aliya*. Only Lévinas stayed in Paris.

The Birth of Jewish Civil Religion: 1960-1980

At the beginning of the 1960s a new period began with the mass immigration into France of Jews from North Africa. Most North African Jews who settled in France were Algerian who had been French citizens since 1870 and, actually, all they did was "change their address." The influx of Jews from North Africa greatly increased the size of the French Jewish community. They adjusted within the existing framework that had been set up at the beginning of the 1950s.

Some years afterwards, in 1967, the Six-Day War was to bring about a strong identification with the State of Israel and with political Zionism. A year later in 1968, the student revolution brought about a new era in French culture and in psychological behavior in France, which prior to this time was still a very Napoleonic country—very square. The year 1968 also marked the beginning of an ideology which said that it was legitimate to be a Jew and to prove to others that one is a Jew. It also became absolutely legitimate to have a Jewish community, whereas prior to that time such legitimacy was still problematic because France has such a very centralistic political culture.

In the 1970s that legitimacy grew and there was no problem in identifying with Judaism. However, in that same decade there began a process of politicization of the community, meaning that Israel and Zionism became central. Most of the activity of the community centers was focused on Israel. This was a period of struggle between Zionists and anti-Zionists, a very difficult period, as more and more of the general communal activity became political activity, not cultural or religious. All the legitimacy in the Jewish community emanated from Zionism.

In the 1980s with the Peace for Galilee war in Lebanon, and afterward with the intifada, this trend was reversed. Israel's image declined and it became harder for Jews to identify with Israel in public. Interest in Israel slowly began to be less demonstrative.

This phenomenon caused a crisis in the communal culture because actually when the Jews in France identified with Zionism and with the State of Israel, they did not do this with the intention of making aliya but rather with the desire to identify as a community in France. That is to say, they found in their identification with the State of Israel an instrument which allowed them to identify as Jews in France.

Haredization in France: The Second Return to Judaism

Against this background of the recession of Zionism, the legitimacy of the new civil religion, and the strength of the intellectual trend, there arose a new phenomenon—the haredization of the 1980s. The Lubavitcher hassidim became very active, as did haredim in general. They introduced new behavioral values exemplified by unbending *halakhah*. People began to reject the *kashrut* of the

rabbinical Beit Din of the Consistoire and wanted to eat *glatt* kosher.

Strangely, all of the French Lubavitchers are Sephardim, whose spiritual and religious origins are quite distant from the Jewish tradition of Eastern Europe. Perhaps it is essentially a reaction to immigration to another country that explains, from a sociological point of view, why Sephardim who came from North Africa identify with Lubavitch. In addition, the Israeli Shas party (of Sephardi haredim) has a lot of hidden influence among the Jews in France, especially with many rabbis. Many people involved with Shas in Israel are French-speaking.

Apart from the Lubavitcher hassidim, haredization in France came from Israel because essentially that is the community's one connection to the Jewish world. French Jewry is very isolated in the Jewish world from the point of view of language and is outside of the world Jewish establishment, but has connections with the State of Israel, based in part on the family ties of those who live in those two countries.

The Lubavitchers have also enhanced the degree of americanization in the behavior of Jews, such as in the use of advertising and demonstrations. For example, during Hanukkah they lit *hanukkiot* in all the public squares of Paris, something never seen in France before. That does not mean that there was no Jewish identity in France, but that Jewish culture and behavior were less demonstrative. Apart from this, they are bringing values that did not spring from the French community itself and are not appropriate to French culture and society. Indeed, there is no coordination between their behavior and the general values of the community. They consider the organized community as a source of resources and funds for their expansion. Generally speaking, they proceed as a sect, entering the congregations, offering help, delegitimizing the rabbi or the lay leaders on behalf of a stringent *halakhah*, and finally seizing control. People who enter haredi society move away from the Jewish community and also from the larger society. In a few more years there will be people who will have trouble connecting to French society in general. The present *baalei teshuva* (newly religious) are in a process of isolation, of feeling strange within their society.

The result is a fight for legitimacy between religious institutions and authorities, especially in

the domain of *kashrut*. This is an important question because much of the income of the consistory rabbinate comes from a percentage of the sale of kosher products.

Confronted with this haredization, consistorial Judaism has had a hard time resisting. Its rabbis are prisoners of haredi stringency, and they are not courageous enough to defend their values, accepting in their synagogues the intrusion of new and stricter norms of religious life, which have aroused profound discontent among the traditionalist public who constitute the synagogues' majority. As a consequence, crises have emerged in many religious communities. While in most cases conflict has remained latent, it is nevertheless very real and sometimes provokes discontented members to leave.

The problem of consistorial Judaism may be seen in the behavior of its leader, Chief Rabbi Joseph Sitruck, who is ultra-orthodox, though not outspoken. His mentor is the Israeli ultra-orthodox leader, Rabbi Shach, and many of Rabbi Sitruck's actions are inspired by this school of thought. In this way, Rabbi Sitruck has established himself in the political, national, and communal sphere, arousing great public controversy around his responsibilities, and challenging the consensus about the relations of the Jewish community with society at large. Until the mid-1990s, the politics of the chief rabbi provoked much tension within the Jewish community, as he tended to overstep his religious role and interfered in the political domain, where CRIF is normally responsible, as he sought to present himself as the sole representative of French Judaism.

The Consistoire vs. CRIF

According to new regulations in the CRIF constitution in the 1980s, the president of CRIF no longer had to be the president of the central Consistoire. This meant that suddenly there were very problematic changes in what had been the accepted arrangement. There were now two representatives of the community. CRIF, which was involved in the political arena, was suddenly identified as secular. The Consistoire, with the office of the Chief Rabbi, was supposed to be only religious, but in fact from its beginning it consisted of two parts—the rabbis and the lay leaders. The organization set up by Napoleon included leaders who were secular Jews in addition to the religious

leaders, and the central Consistoire included both a rabbinical department and a lay department.

Suddenly there appeared to be competition between the *political* and *secular* CRIF, and the *religious* Consistoire. The conflict, as reported in the newspapers, included various incidents of personal conflict, but also shook the established and consensual framework of Jewish existence in French politics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century when separation between church and state was introduced in France, the consistorial organization was transformed into a free organization. The state declared that matters of religion were not the state's business and that people might organize themselves as they wished. But the Consistoire was recognized *de facto* as the representative of French Jewry. For example, when the president of France receives all the organizations and institutions of France on New Year's Day, the chief rabbi of the Consistoire represents the Jews.

Today, the community cannot stand up to the process of haredization because this process transforms the consensual religion, loyal to *halakhah*, into one much more aggressive. It is as if the community has lost its axis, one that had been capable of gathering together all sorts of Jews into one unique framework. This is a new phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Danger of Communal Fragmentation

The haredization of the Jewish community poses a threat to the continuity of the Jewish community in France. It has become clear that all of the community's balance rested on the fact that consistorial Judaism served as its axis, just as a vertebral column is flexible enough to embrace all the movement of the collective body. The moment this axis stiffens, the mobility of the whole body is prevented. As a consequence of this evolution, extremist movements have appeared in recent years. One is a militant secular movement that lambasts religious coercion and opposes the representatives of religious institutions. This is undoubtedly yet another example of the israelization of French Judaism, since up to now, French Judaism has not known this dichotomy of a division between secular and religious Jews. This was seen clearly in the setting of the Conference of Jewish Intellectuals where people of very different ideologies sat side-by-side. The community was pluralistic but had

always been based upon a profound consensus that overcame polarization.

In response, this writer took the initiative and, together with six other intellectuals and rabbis, established the Geshar group in an attempt to recreate the values of modern orthodoxy and, most of all, to promote the idea of the public good of the community. This group was in existence for several years, organizing occasional forums that sought to tackle the major problems of the Jewish community in an open and tolerant atmosphere, one faithful to Jewish values. It focused on questions such as "living together," "conversion," and "common values." The group attracted several dozen people over the years and, though no longer active, Geshar had become a symbol of the reaction to haredization, and of the power to affirm the values of modern orthodoxy for all Jews in a friendly setting.

Today, the question is being raised of whether the Jewish community, or rather the Jewish identity that had evolved after the war, has ceased to exist. A Jewish community in an open society cannot exist without faithful and flexible Judaism. The

community ultimately is based upon voluntary association, and if its members do not feel accepted, they are free to abandon it. This is the risk we now face.

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Professor Shmuel Trigano is a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, teaches at the University of Paris, and is Director of the College des Etudes Juives of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Paris. He is the editor of the landmark 4-volume work *La Societe Juive: A Travers L'Histoire (Jewish Society Throughout History)* (Fayard, 1992), editor of the scholarly journal *Pardes*, and author of *Exile without Return? Letters to a Perplexed Jew* (Paris, 1996). This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum and is part of JCPA's examination of the modern Orthodox counteroffensive against haredization in Jewish communities around the world.