

ZIONISM AS A STRATEGY FOR THE DIASPORA:
FRENCH JEWRY AT A CROSSROADS

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As individuals, not as a community. The revival of messianism. The crisis of modern citizenship.

The French Jewish community is undoubtedly one of the most interesting in the contemporary Jewish world. Although characterized by an active community life, its immediate future is marked by uncertainty, and it will shortly find itself confronted with a fundamental choice. There are those within the Jewish Agency who view this community as the most reliable reservoir for aliyah in the world today, as well as the community most apt to make aliyah in the near future. There is no doubt that its strong identification with Zionism and with the rebirth of the Jewish state has had a marked effect on the history of the community, but this official point of view is unfortunately very superficial. Only a close study of the facts can provide a more realistic evaluation of the situation.

AS INDIVIDUALS, NOT AS A COMMUNITY

The situation of the Jewish community in France today cannot be understood without reference to the constitutional and cultural framework of its identity. The fundamental principle upon which Jewish life in France is based, is that the Jews received French citizenship as individuals, not as a community (a nationality or group). The conception of equality in France is very different from the American conception. To quote from the mottos of the French revolution: "Where there is differentiation, there is no equality." We are all familiar with the famous declaration by Clermont-Tonnerre, one of the leaders of the revolution:

The Jews have their own special judges and leaders. . . . We must deny everything to the Jews as a nationality; and grant everything to the Jews as individuals. . . They are not entitled to constitute either a body politic or a class within the state: they must enjoy citizenship as individuals. But, you will tell me, they don't want this. If so, they must say so, and we will exclude them. A state cannot contain a society of non-citizens, nor can there be a nation within a nation.

This is what I call the 'republican paradox.' The same principle which allowed the fathers of the republic to recognize the Jews as citizens, led them quite rationally to reject the Jewish dimension of their citizenship. This principle was well expressed by Abbé Grégoire, who, in the spirit of European enlightenment, invented this strange dialectic, which differentiates between Jew and man: "The Jews are people like us, before they are Jews." This faulty logic can be presented in the following syllogism:

- 1) All Jews are people (let us recognize them).
- 2) All Jews are only people (namely, they have no right to greater recognition than other people).
- 3) Hence: the Jews no longer exist.

This was the framework of Jewish life in France, and the Jews accepted it. Of course, it did not function properly and, as a scheme, is in fact ambiguous. Throughout the history of the Republic, the Jews, who professed to be 'individuals', appeared in the eyes of the Frenchmen as a group — as a disquieting group. The inherent suspicion remains that Jews regroup themselves secretly in a 'Jewish conspiracy,' which in the course of the two hundred years of the Republic has taken on every possible character: capitalist, communist, international, etc. The most prevalent prism of republican anti-Semitism in France has been the 'Jewish conspiracy.' The official and systematic anti-Semitism of the Vichy regime, which denied the Jews citizenship as a group, also played a decisive role in this process, subconsciously transforming the Jews into a group and a nationality.

However, three events which took place within the space of six years seem to have brought this scheme to a final crisis: the immigration of the Jews from North Africa in 1962; the emergence of an enthusiastic Zionist consciousness following the Six Day War in 1967; and the student revolution of 1968. These three events are closely and profoundly interrelated.

The immigration of the Jews from North Africa led to a sudden massive outburst of individual Jewish identification. This outburst could not be challenged in national terms, as the Jews of Algeria had been French citizens in the fullest sense of the word, since 1830. The arrival of the North African Jews — a large class of citizens, with different, very positive and demonstrative patterns of identification — disturbed the assimilated French community. At the same time, the Six Day War created an unprecedentedly strong feeling of identification with Israel. This new attitude began to gain in strength precisely at the time of the outbreak of the student revolution of 1968. This event marks an important turning point in contemporary French history, and especially in the new cultural outlook in France. For the first time since the Revolution, the right of differentiation began to be accepted as legitimate in France, going against the two-hundred-year-old centralist Jacobin ideology. It is impossible to understand the implications of French Jewry's identification with Israel without these two factors. They highlight the changes in the existing situation: an external change, following a new development in French society and culture; and an internal change, following a change in the identity and the composition of the Jewish community.

THE REVIVAL OF MESSIANISM

What effect did the Six Day War have on Jewish consciousness? The use of the term 'messianism' here is not figurative, but fully refers to a historical event. Indeed, one of the central questions in the debate on the emancipation of the Jews was the question of the Messiah. This was the last problem with which the leaders of the revolution wrestled. "Can the Jew cease to weep on remembering Zion, and, to the extent that he does not relinquish his hopes to rebuild the Temple, can we rely on his word?" The idea that the Jewish people would one day conquer all their enemies, while continuing to await the coming of the

Messiah, serves to explain why the Jews were not assimilated into their host countries: "A tribe. . . whose eyes are constantly turning to a common homeland, in which all its scattered people will one day be gathered together, who therefore cannot feel a strong tie to the land in which they are living."

In order to obtain citizenship, the Jews explicitly rejected this messianism, this world view. In the eyes of the Jews of France, the history of the Jewish nation had come to an end, and the French were the new chosen people. "They are waiting for the Messiah, but they are with greater certainty awaiting death," said one of the Jewish activists for emancipation, Zalkind Hourwitz, and also Leon Blum: "Your Messiah is not more than the symbol of eternal justice." They replaced the old messianism with a republican, French-Jewish form of messianism. "The messianic era arrived together with the new society, replacing the Divine Trinity (Father Son and Holy Ghost) with a new trinity: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

It is clear that the very concept of a 'Jewish state' represented an especially sharp challenge, and undermined this constitutional consensus. Since the transitional stage described above, French Jewry has been caught up in a very rapid process, in which it appears more and more in the guise of a group and a nationality: mass demonstrations for Israel; the 'Jewish vote' in the last presidential elections, 'punishing' Giscard for his Middle Eastern policy; and the recent flourishing of many Jewish radio stations.

In fact, this process has been latent from the outset. The Consistoire itself constituted a means to save what could be saved following the Napoleonic dictate. After the Second World War, the establishment of two major organizations in the Jewish community was a highly significant and revolutionary turning point in the definition of contemporary Jewish identity: The Conseil Représentatif des Juifs de France (CRIF), which represents the community as a whole, with all its organizations; and the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU), conducts activities and maintains institutions in the social, cultural and educational spheres (no longer in the area of 'religion' in the Napoleonic sense of the word, in the sense of abstract faith, without a historical dimension).

The revolutionary aspect of this development was that, for the first time, the Jewish community was defining itself as an entity which could be represented, and most significantly as a social entity within French society. At this point we reach an impasse which characterizes the situation of the community today: the new reality of Jewish life in France stands in contradiction to the classical constitutional-political framework of French Jewry.

Despite the regional reform implemented by the ruling Socialist Party, the recognition of the legitimacy of differentiation has not become a common political culture, especially with regard to the Jews. The regional system stressed provincial, cultural and regional differences, based on the criterion of territory, of a primordial 'fatherland' — precisely what the Jews lack, although they have been living in France for two thousand years. Hence, very logically, when the list of French families was published, the Jews were not mentioned. In a report issued by the Ministry of Culture on "Cultural Democracy and the Right to Differentiation," the Jews are mentioned as a non-territorial minority culture, belonging to the category of 'second generation North African immigrants' (Arabs), and in this category they are listed in a sub-category together with the Armenian and gypsy communities — all this despite two hundred years of citizenship and extensive cooperation in the development of French culture and politics.

Even in this impasse, the Jews found a solution through a unique use of the Zionist symbol. While the Jewish community denies itself the right to interfere in the political life of France (both the CRIF and the Consistoire reiterate this on every public occasion), it interferes with no compunctions, as a group, demonstratively and politically, on the side of Israel whenever the opportunity arises. Its special interest in the State of Israel is proclaimed even in the constitution of the CRIF. After the war in Lebanon, the Consistoire went so far as to issue a declaration that 'it identified fully with the people of Israel and the State of Israel.'

THE CRISIS OF MODERN CITIZENSHIP

What is the solution to this paradox? Briefly, the community found in its championship of the State of Israel the means to assimilate the impasse into the scheme of Jewish life in France. Thus, in order to gain recognition as a collective Jewish community in France, the Jews have been forced to rely on the Zionist symbol three thousand kilometers away. They manifest themselves as Jews living in France in Zionist garb – and this, in order to express their desire to constitute a Jewish community in France. The internal logic of this scheme obliges them to present themselves as Zionists, figuratively speaking. Zionism has become a means for collective Jewish identification and expression in France.

Thus, the Zionist revival in France must be understood not in terms of a real readiness to settle in Israel, but as a means of arousing and strengthening the group existence of the Jewish community in France, an existence which is not recognized by the state. Because of the above-mentioned reasons, the recent revival of this community has very problematic implications.

For the French Jewish community itself, there is a strong tendency towards increasing Jewish alienation in relation to the French social environment in which the community may lose its sense of its own existence. What is being created here is a kind of allegorical existence: the Jews are living in France in the name of, and in terms of Zion. There is also a danger of misunderstanding on the part of non-Jews, as the Jews of France are proving their willingness to live in France, as French citizens in the fullest meaning of the word, under a Zionist flag. This will very quickly arouse the classic suspicion of a 'Jewish conspiracy.'

Aside from this, there is here a surprising deviation from the Zionist idea: Zionism is becoming a strategy for the diaspora. This process indicates the beginning of a crisis of modern citizenship for the Jews. The problem which I have described is undoubtedly unique to French Jewry, but it also has universal implications with regard to the Jewish people. Democratic government and democratic theory have also proved insensitive to Jewish life as a collective and historical group and culture, even when it has been sensitive to individual Jewish sorrow.

Anti-Semitism in the democratic era was one of the results of this insensitivity. Democracy recognised the Jew as an abstract individual, as a person, not as a historical Jew. The very development of political Zionism and the turning of West European Jewry to Zionism was a kind of reaction and response to the failure of democracy to assimilate Jewish life.

Zionism, then, constituted for the Jewish people a way out of the democratic impasse. The attitude towards Zionism, once internally defined, is today defined externally. The Jews of the diaspora are being forced to use the Zionist idea in order to confirm their life in the diaspora. This ideological use of the political Zionist idea, without the attainment of the rights deriving from a state existence – namely, without aliyah – will lead to the transformation of the communities into ghettos within the framework of Western democracy, with very grave results for the State of Israel and for the diaspora.

The revival of the Jewish nation in the diaspora, based solely on the State of Israel, is a sign of crisis in Jewish life in Western democracy, and also of the beginning of a process of decline. The problem today is that there is no alternative if we wish to revive Jewish communal existence. The only way to do so is to formulate a new understanding of a modern citizenship in democracy, and a new framework for the maintenance of cultural and national differences in modern democratic theory.

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