

HASSIDISM IN FRANCE TODAY: A PECULIAR CASE?

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THIS paper attempts to describe Hassidism in France today within its historical and sociological context. That country's hassidic movement is in fact limited to only one group: the Lubavitch, who have displayed a remarkable and astonishing dynamism in the heart of a population which has not in the past been drawn to any form of Hassidism.¹ France has certainly not been a country of choice for the hassidim — neither before nor immediately after the Second World War. Surprisingly, it was only after 1960 (with the mass emigration of North African Jews) that only one hassidic movement, that of the Lubavitch, took hold in France among the newcomers and soon spread throughout the country. That was a doubly peculiar development with the domination of only one hassidic movement among a section of Jewry which had rarely been attracted to that type of Judaism.

Nowadays in France there are believed to be some 10,000 to 15,000 Lubavitch followers (men, women, and children). A proportion of these are loyal adherents while the rest are 'sympathisers' who attend more or less regularly the movement's synagogues or prayer houses. Although 10,000 to 15,000 represent only two to three per cent of the half-million French Jews,² we must bear in mind that before 1950 the country had barely a few dozen Hassidic families of mainly Russian or Ukrainian origin. Nowadays, however, at least three-quarters of the Lubavitch members or sympathisers are of North African origin (from Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) and are mostly the children and grandchildren — the so-called second and third generations — of those who immigrated in the 1960s.

Before the Second World War, Hassidism, like strict Jewish Orthodoxy, had few adherents in France. Admittedly, there were very observant Jews among immigrants from Eastern Europe who had settled in Paris; many of them attended what were known as 'oratoires' (prayer-houses) in the rue des Rosiers (in the fourth arrondissement) which was the historical heart of Parisian Jewry.³ At the time, between the 1920s and the 1940s, a

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small number of Lubavitch members lived in Paris, but they had neither a prayer-house nor any other institution attached to them.

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, after 1945, some Lubavitch hassidim who had been living in the Soviet Union came to Paris but that city was for most of them only a staging post on the way to other destinations — mainly Brooklyn, Montreal, or London. Joseph Isaac Schneerson was then the sixth rebbe (the charismatic leader of the Lubavitch) and at his request some 30 households continued to remain in Paris;⁴ they resided then mainly near the two small synagogues in the rue des Rosiers, spoke little or no French, and the prospect of their winning over *baalei tshuva* (returners to the faith) which was to become the chief aim of the Lubavitch from the 1960s onwards, was not yet one of their main concerns. The Paris Lubavitch, like hassidim elsewhere, have specific religious requirements and the Paris group had to be content with the absolute minimum at first. Admittedly, there was in the district known as le Marais a *mikveh* (ritual bath) but it was apparently the only one in Paris;⁵ and there was only one butcher shop which could boast of being *glat kosher* (very strictly kasher), as well as only one wholly reliable patisserie for cakes and sweetmeats. Gradually, the Lubavitch established other ritual baths and food shops while some members of the movement became *shohetim* (ritual slaughterers of food animals and of poultry) accredited to the Consistoire de France, the official established communal institution of French Jewry.⁶ In fact, the Consistoire and the Jewish communities were short of religious specialist personnel and the Lubavitch were also welcome as religious teachers, as *kashrut* supervisors, etc.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, the synagogue at 17 rue des Rosiers was attended by faithful persons of various Orthodox and hassidic leanings, mainly those who had survived the Shoah (the Holocaust); but gradually most of them left Paris and the synagogue became the place of prayer for religious people who did remain in the locality — in fact the Lubavitcher, who until today are its faithful users. That prayer-house, believed to date from 1879, is not recognisable from the street: it is situated in an apartment on the first floor of an eighteenth-century building and it overlooks an inner courtyard. The main room is reserved for men's prayer while, next to it and near the entrance, there is the space for women's prayer, separated by a screen and curtains. Furniture is very basic: the main room houses an altar and the Torah scrolls, and also a few wooden benches, tables, and book-shelves. It is a place for both prayer and study — quite characteristic of a hassidic *shTibel*.

Very soon after the end of the Second World War, in 1946, the Paris Lubavitcher had set about establishing their own educational establishment, beginning with a yeshiva called *Tomchei Tmimim Lubavitch* (supporters of the purest Lubavitch), about 25 kilometres from Paris, in Brunoy,

surrounded by greenery. The aim of that yeshiva was, and still is, to provide training for rabbis, ritual slaughterers, and religious teachers for the Lubavitcher in France and elsewhere. The principal subjects taught are mainly Talmudical studies and 'hassidism' (*hassidut*) — in fact the study of *Tanya*, the main opus of the founder of the Lubavitch movement, Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745–1813), as well as the sermons and letters (generally published in book form) of the various Lubavitch rebbes. In recent decades, the Lubavitch have studied in particular the writings of their last famous leader, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994).

In the early years of the yeshiva, most of the students were boarders and some of them came from outside France. The younger ones were taught the French language but the studies of the Torah, the Talmud, and of *Tanya* were held (and still are held) in Yiddish, a language which students who are of North African origin have to learn. In fact, since 1950 the yeshiva received not only Ashkenazi students but also some young Moroccans who had already attended in Morocco the Lubavitch institutions established immediately after the end of the Second World War.⁷ Also in the early years, the Brunoy yeshiva used to send its senior students to teach in *talmudei Torah*; these were just schools which provided the equivalent of Sunday-school tuition. They held classes to provide some Jewish education for pupils aged 7 to 14 years on Sundays and on the weekly half-day of secular schools. Lubavitch had not then established full-time primary or secondary schools. Later on, in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s some 20 *talmudei Torah* staffed by the Lubavitch were opened in the rue des Rosiers, in the 18th and 19th arrondissements, in Montreuil, in Aubervilliers, and in the Lilas.

In 1947, the Lubavitch founded a school for girls, Beth Rivka, in Montmorency, outside Paris; it was later transferred to Yerres, near Brunoy. By 1975 there were 150 pupils while nowadays there are some 600. It has both a primary and a secondary tuition cycle, which follow the state's educational requirements and therefore receives financial support from the state. However, the school also has had since 1958 a nursery and a boarding seminary where religious tuition predominates and these therefore do not receive any state subsidy. It must also be noted that nowadays before being admitted to the seminary (which has provision for 60 students), the young girls must have first obtained either a '*Brevet d'enseignement commercial, professionnel*' (BEPC) or a baccalaureat and there is also a provision for preparing a '*premier cycle universitaire de langues*' (Deug).⁸ Thus, among the Lubavitch, as among other hassidic groups, the girls (including those who will later teach religious studies) are given a secular education which is broader than that provided for boys. That seminary has educated a number of female teachers who are active in Lubavitch or other religious schools in France and elsewhere. I shall return later in this paper to the remarkable development of the Lubavitch educational system, which in France probably more than in

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other countries is a major factor in the flourishing of the hassidic movement.

Events of major importance in North Africa provided a great stimulus for the Lubavitch to effect a transformation. In 1956, Tunisia and Morocco achieved their independence and after six years of bitter war Algeria finally became independent in 1962. The majority of the Jewish population of these three countries left their native lands and a large proportion of them came to settle in France. Algerian Jews, after the Crémieux decree of 1870, were French citizens. Some Tunisian and Moroccan Jews were already familiar with Lubavitch. In 1951, Menachem Mendel Schneerson had sent Habad⁹ emissaries to open various schools in these two countries and these religious institutions attracted children of underprivileged families and created a significant link between the Lubavitch and North African Jews.¹⁰ Thus young girls who had been to Habad schools in Tunisia were able to continue their studies in Lubavitch seminaries in Crown Heights in New York and then became religious teachers in Paris.

However, the first generation of Algerian and Tunisian Jews who settled in France were not much influenced by Lubavitch; they identified mainly with the secular values of the French republic and modernism and wished to give their children a secular education which would fit them for good social positions. They also certainly wanted to provide their children with a traditional Jewish religious knowledge and therefore sought to enroll them into Sunday Schools — which happened to be provided mainly by the Lubavitcher. On the other hand, many Jews from Morocco were generally devoted to their own religious practices and were not attracted by the Ashkenazi hassidism of the Lubavitch. But the transplantation of the North African newcomers to France was very painful. The old extended families with their fierce kinship loyalties were now dispersed not only in various parts of France but also in the United States, in Canada, and in Israel. They did not always look back nostalgically to their North African past, but they resented their inability to lead 'a proper Jewish existence'. Meanwhile, the Lubavitcher rebbe had since the early 1960s embarked on a missionary campaign — directed only to Jews — entitled *Ahavat Israel* (Love of Israel) and his emissaries in France took the opportunity for outreach to the uprooted immigrants.

The Lubavitch emissaries were Yiddish speakers; they spoke French only haltingly and with a Russian accent. However, unlike the French native Jews who were perceived by the North Africans to be distant 'and almost goy-like', the Lubavitcher were warm, friendly, and listened attentively to the problems brought by the immigrants. They gave advice and entered into proper dialogue. In particular, their rabbis and *shlichim* (emissaries) dealt with the practical problems of the North African Jews, who wished to conform to religious requirements. Thus, one woman states that she had telephoned the Consistoire several times to enquire how she

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should proceed to make her crockery and cutlery *kasher*, but the instructions she was given seemed to her to be very sketchy. An acquaintance gave her the telephone number of the Lubavitch organization and that very evening two hassidic members came to her door and took the crockery and cutlery to immerse them in the appropriate prescribed water.¹¹ As for the affixing of *mezuzot*, the Lubavitcher were very willing not only to provide them (during their systematic campaigns for that observance) but they also obligingly affixed them to the doors.

Nevertheless, for North African Jews of the first generation to settle in France, the Lubavitcher were too extreme.¹² It was only after 1965, in the main, that some of them abandoned their native religious practices and followed those of the Lubavitch; this happened when a large proportion of Lubavitcher and of North African Jews had already been born (or had grown up) in France. Rabbi Shmuel Azimov, a former student at the Brunoy yeshiva, therefore educated in France, became in 1965 the leader of missionary activities among the Jews in France. Young emissaries — who had been brought up in France and spoke French fluently — were now active among young Jews of North African origin who were also French-speaking. Then there was the Six-Day War of 1967 which stimulated a quest for identity, often a religious quest, among many French Jews. Later, as in the case of the counter-cultural movement in the United States, the 'revolutionary' events of May and June 1968 in France affected many Jewish young men and women and the Lubavitcher tried to reach them: they provided Habad houses where friendly and sympathetic rabbis welcomed these young persons, who were disoriented and who were seeking a meaning for their lives. That encounter (between Lubavitch efforts and these circumstances) achieved results beyond all expectations: Lubavitch hassidism progressed and grew in France and in particular it acquired a Sephardi facet — while young Ashkenazi Jews still more influenced by the ambient French secularism, were (apart from some exceptions) much less drawn to Habad. In the course of time, the Lubavitch faithful of Russian origin have increasingly become a minority.

French Lubavitch and Sephardi Culture.

Nowadays, young Jews of North African origin who constitute the second or third generation of settlement in France, and who adhere to Lubavitch hassidism, no longer speak the Arabic or the Judeo-Arabic languages of their grandparents (or in some cases, of their parents). They were born, brought up, and educated in France and they express themselves in the French language. Moreover, some of them can now speak some Yiddish, since Yiddish is the language of instruction in the Brunoy yeshiva and of course in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, where some of them go on short or extended visits. By adhering to Habad, they discard many of the traditional practices of North African origin. Thus, these new

recruits would not even consider celebrating the *Mimouna*, when in North Africa at the end of the Passover festival, couscous and sweetmeats like baklava were offered by the Arab neighbours and were eaten together with them; such a commensalism is not accepted by the hassidim.¹³ Indeed, new converts to hassidism tend to minimise or to actively reject the Judeo-Arab past of their ancestors and they adopt the customs of another Jewish culture — appropriating a legendary and mythical past, that of the hassidic world of Eastern Europe.¹⁴ One of the major vehicles of this transformation is their assimilation of Lubavitch *hassidut*, as noted above.

Among the Lubavitcher, married women must cover their head (while they theoretically have their head shaved or their hair cut short) but they rarely wear a head scarf or a veil, as most Muslim women do in France. More often, they wear wigs (which frequently are indistinguishable from their own natural hair), under elegant caps or small hats. They also increasingly tend to wear modern Western-style clothes: many Lubavitch women or those who are sympathisers of that hassidism (and especially the younger ones who have enrolled their children in Habad schools), instead of wearing dark dresses of below-knee length (which are cut amply loose) and dark stockings, now wear long close-fitting dresses which give the look of present-day fashion. Indeed, in many cases it is quite difficult to identify these hassidic women by their appearance.

During my fieldwork in Paris in 2003, I noted that Lubavitch hassidism has altered in several respects. To start with, some prayer-houses which I visited bear little resemblance to the hassidic *shetlekh*: they have rows of seats, as is the usage in classic synagogues — not tables surrounded by benches for studying the large volumes of the Talmud. Moreover, during the festival of Sukkot, it is accepted for women to have their meals next to men in the booths or cabins erected for the days of the festival. At the prayer-house of the rue des Rosiers, the *gabbay*, who during the morning prayer is in charge of selecting (on two weekdays) those who are given the honour of saying the blessings before and after the reading of Torah excerpts, the *alyah*, will readily ask some apparently non-hassidic and unknown visitor (indeed, he did call me), to recite the first important blessing, that of the Cohanim — the Priestly Blessing. Moreover, during daily prayers on weekdays, no one seems to be shocked when the ring of mobile telephones is heard, or by the conversations which follow that ring. Admittedly, the Lubavitcher are generally more tolerant than other hassidim, but for the Lubavitch of North African origin that tolerance¹⁵ was part of their Mediterranean cultural heritage rather than a result of their adherence to Lubavitch missionary teachings. Indeed there is a 'sephardisation' of Habad hassidism in France.

Furthermore, the French Lubavitch are very proud of the fact that they practise one particular *minek*, local custom. In 1973 a group of about 30 followers, mostly *baalei-tshuva*, visited Crown Heights during the high

holy days. In the main Lubavitch synagogue, on *Simhat Torah*, during the Hassidic dancing procession of the Rejoicing of the Law, the rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson) called upon all the visitors from France to participate in dancing and he began to sing the usual sequence of liturgical verses, *Ha-aderet ve ha emuna*, to the tune of *la Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, which has a marked revolutionary lyric. The next day he explained to the visitors that this anthem would help to effect a revolution in France, against *yetzer-ha-ra*, the evil tendency or impulse.¹⁶ The rebbe wanted the Lubavitcher to chant in this fashion during Simhat Torah — but only in France. Since then, the Lubavitcher in France proudly observe that practice which, at least symbolically, contributes to merge their Ashkenazi and North African origins into a common French Lubavitch identity.¹⁷

The Lubavitch Institutions and the Educational System

Nowadays the Lubavitcher have no less than 70 *shlichim* (emissaries) actively engaged in the various institutions of the movement, in Paris and its environs. In the capital, their synagogues and Habad houses are mainly situated in eastern Paris, especially in the 19th and 20th arrondissements — where, during the last decades, many Lubavitch members have their homes, as do many other pious Jews, especially those of North African origin. The rue des Rosiers synagogue certainly continues to function while the administrative building (situated rue Lamartine in the 9th arrondissement) serves also as a prayer-house and has facilities for adult classes. In the suburbs of Paris there are about 20 Habad houses and oratories. However, the Lubavitcher do not neglect other areas which have no nucleus of observant Jews and although they do not have prayer-houses in every district, they do have emissaries who live in various other parts of the city and suburbs where Jews are dispersed — for instance, Pontault-Combault, Maisons-Laffitte, Poissy. These emissaries can be easily reached by telephone and from such an initial contact, they can expect to establish closer links with dispersed Jewish inhabitants.

As noted above, in the years immediately following the Second World War, the Lubavitcher provided Sunday schools as well as classes held on the weekly half-day of secular schools and established the Brunoy yeshiva and a school for girls in Yerres. In the 1960s, Lubavitcher rabbis joined forces with a community of Algerian Jews (who had emigrated from their native town of Ghardaïa) and they founded a full-time religious school in Aubervilliers which they named *Chne-Or*, a light of two, since two communities had united to build that school, which today has classes from nursery to the final year of secondary education and is under state control. Since the 1960s, the Lubavitcher have progressed to boast nowadays of some 7,000 pupils in the various Habad institutions to be found in the

Paris conurbation, apart from a further 1,500 in eight provincial cities: Cannes, Dijon, Grenoble, Lyon, Marseille, Nice, Strasbourg and Toulouse.¹⁸ That remarkable expansion is partly the result of the usual demographic growth among hassidim and partly owing to two other factors. First, Lubavitch schools (unlike other orthodox schools in France) will admit pupils from families who are not totally observant as long as at least their children observe rules in force in the school, such as the wearing of skullcaps for boys and modest clothing for girls; such an attitude is in keeping with the welcoming spirit and the missionary vocation of the movement.¹⁹ Second, among many more or less traditionalist Jewish households nowadays, there is a real concern about secular schools, especially because of recurring problems of violence, drugs, extortion rackets, and particularly since the intensification of the Middle East conflict, the antisemitism (sometimes expressed violently) of a number of Muslim pupils.

The Lubavitcher have now various school groups in the Paris conurbation: there are, of course, the *yeshiva* and the *heder* (primary religious school) in Brunoy, with 400 pupils in the *yeshiva* and 100 in the *heder*; for girls, the Beth Rivkah school and seminary with 600 pupils in Yerres; the Aubervilliers Chne-Or school mentioned above which has 500 pupils; and other schools in Sarcelles, Fontenay-sous-Bois, Massy, Villeneuve-la-Garenne, as well as recently a *kolel* in Yerres — an advanced *yeshiva* whose students usually are young married men, with an intake of 30 to 50 students every year.

In the city of Paris there are major institutions: the Cité de l'Education Sinaï for girls in the 18th arrondissement (inaugurated in 1990) which has 1,200 pupils ranging from nursery to the final year of the lycée, with technical and vocational options, while for the boys there is la Cité de l'Education Heikhal Menachem in the 20th arrondissement (inaugurated in 1995). The latter group has one building with five floors and another with seven floors; they house a *heder* and a lycée with the two options as available for girls, and also a library, a gymnasium, and a synagogue. The lycées for girls and for boys are under state supervision and are subsidized by the state. Finally, there is an establishment for girls with two schools (Beth Mouchka and Beth Hana), also subsidized by the State and under government supervision; they are housed in a large modern building with a usable space of 18,000 square metres, in the rue Petit in the 19th arrondissement. There are some 2,000 pupils, from kindergarten to the final year of secondary school, with 75 classrooms benefiting from modern architecture, with large windows providing good daylight. There is also a crèche with 80 cribs, a library, a kitchen, a refectory, and a gymnasium. It is claimed to be the largest school in Europe which conforms to Orthodox Jewish practice; but only a small proportion of the pupils come from Lubavitch households, while there are also some pupils from non-observant homes. Again, that is in keeping with the missionary zeal of the

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Lubavitcher, and also with the welcoming stance so characteristic of Habad in France. The present building replaces several dispersed establishments; it was started in 1995, was ready for occupation in the school year starting in 1999, and was officially inaugurated in November 2000. The pupils appear to be given remarkably good tuition since the examination results for the baccalaureate (whether the option is science, economics, or sociology — no option for philosophy or literature is available), are excellent: year after year it shows an almost 100 per cent success rate.

A plaque affixed to the entrance of the Haya Mouchka complex states that its solemn inauguration was graced with the presence of the chief rabbis of France and of Paris, by the presidents of the Paris Consistoire and of the Consistoire central de France, of the Conseil représentatif des Institutions juives de France (CRIF), and the director of the Fonds social juif unifié. That school complex is therefore recognized by the Jewish establishment of France — which clearly thus gives it respectability as far as non-hassidic parents are concerned, when they have to decide on the type of schooling for their children. As is customary among hassidim, there is a total separation between the boys' and the girls' schools. Thus, Haya Mouchka has an 'annexe' for boys, with 700 pupils, in the 20th arrondissement: it has a primary school and a junior high school, but the cycle of secular studies for boys is more limited than the one available for girls — as is usually the case among other hassidic movements.

In the various school complexes, kindergartens provide the foundation for a Jewish education; there are about 10 of them in the Paris conurbation, with several hundred children and since they are not subject to French government educational rules, the Lubavitcher can socialize the children according to their own ideas. Thus, they teach the pupils at an early age to read the prayer-book in Hebrew. In fact, the children have to become familiar with several languages. When those kindergartens were established from 1975 on, those in authority did not wish to teach the French language since they wanted to persevere with the traditional *heder* practice of the use of Yiddish. But the parents disagreed and eventually Hebrew was taught in the morning and French in the afternoon. Indeed, for the Lubavitcher as for other hassidim, the Hebrew language is reserved for praying and for the reading of the Torah. But modern Hebrew, such as is used in Israel, has come into the kindergartens with the use of Israeli children's textbooks and also because some of the pupils and some of the teachers have lived in Israel. As for Yiddish, although it is generally not spoken by children of North African origin, some phrases such as *gut shabbes*, *gut yontov* (happy festival), *yourtsayt* (anniversary of death) and others, have infiltrated the vocabulary of the young children. Among themselves — whether in the classroom, or outside, or at home — the children speak French. For children of North African origin, who are the majority, Yiddish is a foreign tongue while Hebrew is essentially the language of the sacred. Nevertheless, while the children's formal education proceeds

year by year, those two languages are increasingly used; in the Brunoy yeshiva teaching is given in Hebrew and in Yiddish.

All hassidic movements attach great importance to education and they would prefer, if they can afford it, to provide it in their own schools; but in any case their children receive a hassidic education in their own home — which is far from the case for children of North African origin who go to Lubavitch schools in France. Because of the large influx in Habad communities of so many new members of that origin, Lubavitch schools attach particular importance to teach and socialize these pupils according to the movement's precepts.²⁰ But that course of action does not always find favour with those parents of traditional North African background. A native of Djerba commented about their own children:

We do all we can at home to transmit to them our traditions, our customs, our education, although our children go to the Sinai school [one of the Lubavitch schools]. It is not always easy. We try our utmost to make them understand the extent of our old culture, how rich and alive it is, so that they may not forget where they come from, so that they may not be led to believe that they come from Eastern Europe.

That is only one among many such observations, expressing resentment against what appears to some to be a belittlement of Sephardi religion and culture.²¹ These criticisms notwithstanding, the Lubavitch schools have indubitably achieved great deployment. In 1990 Lubavitch educational establishments in the Paris conurbation had 3317 pupils²² but the number since then has more than doubled, with 7,000.

Financial Problems. The Professions

As noted above, Lubavitch schools are in great part subsidized by the French government; they must bind themselves by contract to abide by health and safety regulations and to teach various required subjects (French language, mathematics, geography, chemistry, physics, etc.). In the case of crèches, they are subsidized by the municipalities. However, other substantial costs have to be met — such as the construction of school buildings and their maintenance, and the salaries of the teachers, especially those who teach religion. Parents are supposed to pay school fees, but their contribution is most inadequate. Nowadays, Jewish national institutions, such as the *Fond social juif unifié* (FSJU), promote initiatives which aim to maintain Jewish life by social, educational, and cultural activities; and the FSJU does contribute to the maintenance of Lubavitch schools, but only to a small extent. It is therefore very necessary to collect funds and to appeal vigorously to donors not only for the schools but also for the prayer-houses and other Lubavitch services. It must be stressed that Habad in France (like Habad in other countries) receives no funds from the Lubavitch head office in Crown Heights. Some Lubavitch

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members are therefore kept very busy in their efforts to gather funds and the movement does appear to be successful in one way or another in gathering funds from its members and sympathisers. Among other resources, there is an annual fund-raising gala and the one held in December 2003 required each couple to pay 500 Euros for their entrance ticket; in 2001 the cost of such a ticket had been the equivalent of 400 Euros (2,600 francs).

The Lubavitch movement does have sponsors who are well-to-do: medical doctors, dentists, and others in the liberal professions as well as engineers, business people, and experts in information technology among others. Some of these donors are members, others are only 'sympathizers'.²³ In France a comparatively great number of Lubavitchers provide religious services for the country's Jews. They are ritual slaughterers of food animals, *kashrut* supervisors, butchers, bakers, restaurant owners, etc. who provide kosher ingredients; there are also booksellers and stationers who sell religious books, especially Habad texts. Finally, there are very many teachers of every degree of competence (from pupil teachers to headmasters and headmistresses), employed in the various Lubavitch schools. Thus the Lubavitch movement conforms to the situation of other hassidic groups in the world by having a great proportion of their gainfully-employed personnel in various forms of religious occupations.²⁴

Politics

The Lubavitch movement became particularly involved in political matters when it was building the Haya Mouchka complex in the rue Petit. The erection proved to be extremely costly, totalling more than one hundred million francs (15 million Euros). Lubavitch asked the regional council of the Île-de-France for a subsidy and a financial guarantee but in spite of the support of the council's moderate right-wing parties, their request was rejected on four occasions in 1994; a majority of the council — with the left-wing Greens, communists, socialists as well as the extreme right-wing Front National — refused, on the grounds of secularism. Nevertheless, the mayor of Paris himself (Jean Tibéri, a member of the Rassemblement pour la République, President Jacques Chirac's moderate right-wing party), took the responsibility for the municipality of Paris to give a grant and to provide also a public guarantee for a loan of 10 million francs (1,525,000 Euros). The Lubavitch seem to have shown their appreciation of the assistance they had been given: Hillel Pevsner, Chief Rabbi of the Lubavitch, called for votes for Jacques Chirac at the presidential election of 1995.²⁵ Admittedly, the Lubavitch spokesman (rabbi Haïm Nissenbaum) stated that each member must vote according to his conscience; but he added that Jacques Chirac had obtained much sympathy from the Lubavitchers by providing support for communal matters.²⁶

Thus Lubavitch is involved, in the pursuit of its own interests, in French politics at both the municipal and the national levels. Recently, the intensification of the conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians and a series of major and minor manifestations of antisemitism in France have affected the Lubavitch as they have affected other Jews — especially in districts where Jews and Muslims had for long lived side by side without any major incidents. The hassidim with their striking visibility (their beards, the men's black hats, the skullcaps for small boys, etc.) are easy targets and therefore are frequently the victims of trouble-makers. Often, individuals are attacked; households are threatened and insulted; and graffiti are painted on the front doors of Jewish apartments. The Lubavitcher have taken some precautions — for instance, women and children do not go into the streets after 9 p.m. in some districts — but they generally trust the authorities to give them protection while they themselves provide discreet surveillance.

The Lubavitch have also managed, in the course of years, to become a rather significant partner of the Consistoire, which is the officially-recognized religious institution of French Jewry, although there have been persistent conflicts between the Consistoire and the Lubavitcher about kasher meat. In 1991 two Lubavitch rabbis decided to establish their own ritual slaughter, in order to use the fees they received for that procedure for the benefit of Lubavitch institutions, especially the Sinai school.²⁷ The movement embarked upon a campaign for the institutional acknowledgment of the validity of their own slaughter, so that they might have access to the abattoirs: since a decree of 1981, the licence for Jewish ritual slaughter can be given only by the Chief Rabbi of France, on the recommendation of the rabbinical tribunal of the Consistoire, which controls the validity of *kashrut* claims. Pressure was exerted on that tribunal, kasher butchers were approached, and there was even a meeting with the Minister of the Interior who is also in charge of religious matters. Neither the Lubavitch nor the Consistoire wished the dispute to proceed to a court case whose decision was not easily predictable. It took four years to reach an agreement: the Consistoire granted the Lubavitcher official licences and a share of the fees received by the slaughterers was given to the *Association consistoriale israélite de Paris*. The Lubavitcher were authorized to affix their own stamp certifying the *kashrut* of the butcher shops which they sponsor (six in the Paris conurbation) as well as the *kashrut* of some two dozen restaurants but they gave also an undertaking that they would not question the validity of the *kashrut* certificates granted by the Consistoire. On the other hand, the Lubavitcher proceeded to create their own rabbinical council which awards various restaurants, butcher shops, caterers, etc. its own *kashrut* certification and since the year 2000 has provided a list of all institutions which it monitors so that in effect the Lubavitcher now have in some ways a parallel Consistoire.

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Moreover, a peculiar situation has arisen. Some Lubavitch slaughterers, among them Rabbi Belinov, had been working for many years for the Consistoire. Yet Rabbi Belinov was one of the initiators of the request to grant his movement slaughter licences, and after the end of hostilities he has been appointed as *dayan* (a member of the rabbinic court) in the *tribunal rabbinique consistorial* of Paris, where he presides precisely over all matters concerned with ritual slaughter!²⁸ The 1995 agreement and the high status attained by Rabbi Belinov mark the influence of Lubavitch in matters where religion and economics are so strongly intermingled as a result of the substantial financial contributions from the fees for ritual slaughter. Moreover, a Lubavitch rabbi is today one of the eight vice-presidents of the Paris Consistoire, while there has also been an insertion into secular Judaism: as stated above, the Lubavitcher since 2001 have been active in the CRIF. The CRIF's major objective is to pursue political action in dealings with government authorities, with the media, etc. Apart from its fight against antisemitism, another major objective of the CRIF has been to support the State of Israel, come hell or high water.

The Lubavitcher movement has thus managed to find accommodation with both the religious and the political establishments in the country. Interestingly, these do not seem to have been much troubled by the over-enthusiastic personality cult of the last rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. In the 1990s, many of his devotees believed that he was the Messiah; later, after his death and burial in 1994, many still awaited his resurrection and consequent confirmation that he was indeed the Messiah.²⁹ In France the Lubavitch rabbis and emissaries, if they may believe in private that Schneerson is the Messiah and will arise from the dead, do not publicise that belief; recent brochures, pamphlets, and other Lubavitch publications do not mention this matter.³⁰ Indeed, most of the local leaders are probably well aware that French Jews would not easily welcome a messianic climate. Furthermore, the movement puts strong emphasis on its orthodox but non-sectarian programme in its huge schools; this stress on spreading Judaism in accordance with the *Ahavat Israel*, (Love of Israel) now a long-established Lubavitch commitment, certainly serves to popularise Lubavitch hassidism in France, whereas advertising messianism would probably have an opposite result.³¹

Moreover, although Lubavitch in France is certainly devoted to the State of Israel and concerned about the future of its Jewish population, the movement refrains from making declarations about events in the Middle East. Such a cautious position may have been taken in consideration of the Muslim population in France but it also gives an aura of moderation and respectability to the Lubavitcher among French Jews (whether or not they are familiar with their institutions and their missionary activities), who mostly view them as a responsible and efficient ultra-orthodox movement which has — among its other achievements — helped to strengthen Jewish identity.

Conclusion

In France, a country strongly dedicated to secular values, only the Lubavitcher, among the various hassidic movements, have succeeded in creating and maintaining a firmly visible and respected presence, owing in part to their comparatively modernistic and non-sectarian attitudes.³² Admittedly, the extraordinary expansion of its members has been helped in their case as in that of other hassidim by the observance of the commandment to be 'fruitful and multiply';³³ but another major factor in that expansion has been the adherence of Jewish immigrants from North Africa and in particular of the children and grandchildren of the original immigrants who settled in France in the 1950s and 1960s. Those second and third generations, on adhering to hassidism, also have been fruitful and multiplied. However, it must be noted that in France, unlike the case of many other countries, the recruits have not been 'repenting Jews' (*ba'alei tshuva*), with no or very little religious upbringing, but Jews who were traditionally imbued with at least traditional Jewish values and observances. Moreover, by adhering to Lubavitch, these recruits were, deliberately or not, expressing their rejection of their Judeo-Arab past and probably at the same time their resentment against a French consistorial Establishment which had not truly extended to them a warm welcome.³⁴

There have been other general factors which may somewhat explain the affinities between North African Jews settled in France and Lubavitch Hassidism. The hassidim have always adopted Isaac Luria's Sephardi liturgy and prayer book (*Nussach ha-Ari*) and possibly of still greater importance is the fact that both hassidim and many North African Jews have an intense veneration for holy persons or saints. Hassidim venerate the rebbe or *tsaddik* (saint) and believe in his miracles and divine gifts (as in the case of the Lubavitcher extraordinary veneration for rabbi Schneerson) while the North Africans have also their revered saints who are believed to perform miracles. They are devoted for instance to the *hillula*, festivity, a pilgrimage to the shrines of saints, especially in Israel,³⁵ and also to a famous shrine in Djerba, Tunisia.

Whatever its exact causes, the massive 'sephardization' of the Lubavitch movement in France is an original and unexpected development in the movement. Admittedly, the main Lubavitcher leaders are still of Russian origin, even if some of them were born in France; but the majority of the officials in the various Habad institutions are now of North African origin and come from a Sephardi religious tradition. The large presence of North Africans leaders, members, and supporters has influenced French hassidism, which is more tolerant and liberal than elsewhere, particularly in its schools which extend a warm welcome to a wide public. Moreover, when we consider that the Lubavitch movement in France with its 10,000 to 15,000 members and sympathizers, accounts for more than a small fraction of the movement's total across the world,

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perhaps the Sephardi laissez-faire style will gain acceptance among the Lubavitcher in other countries — especially since there is now no longer a single charismatic and all-powerful rebbe to lay down specific aims and prescriptions which must be unquestionably and devotedly obeyed.

Acknowledgment

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NOTES

¹ Laurence Podselver has published several pioneering articles on the subject. See especially her 1) 'Le mouvement Lubavitch: déracinement et insertion des séfarades', *Pardès*, vol. 3, 1986, pp. 54–68 and 2) 'La tradition réinventée: les hassidim de Loubavitch en France', *Revue des Etudes juives*, 1992, vol. 151, pp. 441–50.

² Recent research, by questionnaire, was carried out under the supervision of Erik H. Cohen (see 'Les résultats de la grande enquête sur les juifs de France' *L'Arche*, vol. 538, December 2002, pp. 54–73). It estimates the number of Jews in France to be from 500,000 to 575,000 persons, according to the criteria used; the smaller total, 500,000, is based on a restricted definition: the households of those interviewed who declared themselves and also their whole family to be Jewish, while the figure of 575,000 is based on the number of individuals in households whose head has asserted he or she was Jewish but that the household includes other residents who are not. In the case of the hassidim, of course, only the former criterion would apply, since they obviously would include only Jewish persons in their family unit.

³ It has been the historical heart of Paris Jewry since emancipation in 1791.

⁴ That is according to the Lubavitcher rabbi Haïm Nissenbaum, spokesman of the movement in France.

⁵ See (Anonymous) 'Les débuts des institutions 'Habad' en France, chapitre II: les premiers pas', *Kountrass*, vol. 96, July 2003, p. 11.

⁶ The Consistoire is a communal institution created in 1808 during Napoleon's empire, under state control. After the separation of Church and State in 1905, the Consistoire became a voluntary religious organization.

⁷ It is said that in Morocco, more than 75 pedagogical institutions provided tuition for about 10,000 young Jewish Moroccans; see 'Les débuts...' op. cit. in Note 5 above, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹ Habad, another name for Lubavitch, is an acrostic formed from the initials of the Hebrew words *hokhma*, *bina* and *da'at*. The words mean wisdom, discernment, and knowledge.

¹⁰ See Note 7 above.

¹¹ An observant Jew, who follows the prescriptions of the *Shulhan Arukh*, must immerse newly bought cooking utensils into flowing water — water from a spring, a river, or rain.

¹² See Podselver, 1986, op. cit. in Note 1 above, pp. 61–63.

¹³ The Mimouna celebrated the return to a 'normal' diet after the end of the Passover in North Africa, when couscous and sweetmeats were eaten and non-Jewish neighbours were welcome.

¹⁴ See Podselver, 1986, op. cit. in Note 1 above, p. 64.

¹⁵ See Victor Malka, *Les juifs sépharades*, Presses universitaires de France (Que sais-je? series), Paris, 1997, pp. 70–71 and 80. The Ashkenazi Jews have tended for centuries to be far more rigorous than the Sephardim in matters relating to *kashrut* and to be extreme in their interpretation of religious observances. Sephardim generally have a more liberal interpretation and their behaviour is characterised by spontaneity, hospitality, and tolerance; the Lubavitcher most often practice the latter two.

¹⁶ Norman Solomon in his *Historical Dictionary of Judaism*, published in 1998 (p. 415) states that the tendency to do evil can be overcome through God's grace and Torah, and notes that the words *yetzer* and *ha-ra'* occur in Genesis, Chapter 6, verse 5.

¹⁷ Several Lubavitch adherents related this story to me. See also the French Lubavitch web site 'loubavitch.fr/pages/lerabbiet la france.asp'.

¹⁸ See (Anonymous) 'Ecoles juives de France', *Kountrass*, vol. 70, 2000 (Internet version).

¹⁹ Another orthodox school establishment, *Ozer ha-Torah*, founded after the Second World War by North African Jewish immigrants, is far more strict.

²⁰ See Podselver, 1992, op. cit. in Note 1 above, pp. 442, 443.

²¹ See Michèle Baron, 'De Djerba à Paris XIX^e', *L'Arche*, vol. 508, 2000, p. 69; Patrick Simon and Claude Tapia, *Le Belleville des juifs tunisiens*, Paris, Autrement, 1998, pp. 157–8; and Laurence Podselver and Denise Weill, 'La nouvelle orthodoxie et la transmission familiale', *Pardès*, vol. 22, 1996, p. 153.

²² See Podselver, 1992, op. cit. in Note 1 above, p. 441.

²³ No precise data are available to provide a socio-professional profile of the movement.

²⁴ Unemployment does not appear to be a serious problem among the faithful.

²⁵ See Nicolas Weill, 'Essor et désarroi des Loubavitch', *Le Monde*, 21 September 1996, p. 11. By a decree of 14 July 1997, Hillel Pevsner was given the title of chevalier de la Légion d'honneur. President Chirac himself invested him with that decoration at the Elysée Palace and made a speech referring to him as an 'ami de longue date'.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ On the subject of kasher meat, see Sophie Nizard, 'La cacherout en France. Organisation matérielle d'une consommation symbolique', *Les Cahiers du judaïsme*, vol. 3, 1998, pp. 64–73 and Julien Bauer, *La nourriture cacher*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, (Que sais-je ? series) 1996, pp. 58–59.

²⁸ See Sophie Nizard, *L'Economie du croire. Une anthropologie des pratiques alimentaires juives en modernité*, thèse de Doctorat, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales, Paris, 1995, vol. II, p. 252.

²⁹ See William Shaffir, 'When Prophecy is not Validated: Explaining the Unexpected in a Messianic Campaign', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. XXXVII, n^o2, December 1995, pp. 119–36; Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press (transl. from the Hebrew), 1996, pp. 193 ff. and David Berger, *The Rebbe*,

the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference, London and Portland (Oregon), Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001.

³⁰ However, one Lubavitch rabbi in Paris founded a small group which has published for some time a periodical, *Le courrier de la Gueoula*, spreading the messianic resurrectionist belief.

³¹ The almost monolithic nature of Lubavitch in France is in sharp contrast with the movement's position in other countries. In the United States, in Crown Heights, Lubavitch yeshivot have been marked by rifts and even in Lubavitcher headquarters there are conflicting groups: 'resurrectionists', who add after the rebbe's name 'Long live King Messiah' and the non-resurrectionists who say classically, 'of blessed Memory'. The first have even recently taken control of the building; see Jan Feldman, *Lubavitchers as citizens: A paradox of liberal democracy*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2003, pp. 35–36; Jonathan Mahler, 'Waiting for the Messiah of Eastern Parkway', *The New York Times*, Magazine desk, section 6, 21 September 2003; Stephanie Wellen Levine, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers. An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2003, pp. 2–3, 146, 171–2. In Antwerp (Belgium) there are two Lubavitcher groups, one resurrectionist, the other not. In Israel, at the hassidic village of Kfar Chabad the 'messianists' dominate; see Henri Guirchoun, 'Le messie s'est arrêté à Kfar Habad', *Nouvel Observateur*, n° 1685, 20 février 1997.

³² Recently a group of Bratslaver Hassidim, the so-called *toïte hasidim* (Yiddish for dead hassidim) who are adepts of a rebbe departed since 1811, has opened a place of worship, but there are only a few dozen adepts.

³³ See Jacques Gutwirth, *La renaissance du hassidisme, de 1945 à nos jours*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2004.

³⁴ See Podselver, 1986, op. cit. in Note 1 above, 1986, p. 57.

³⁵ See Yoram Bilu, 'Dreams and the wishes of the Saint' in Harvey E. Goldberg (ed.), *Judaism viewed from within and from without. Anthropological studies*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1987, pp. 285–313 and Stéphanie Le Bars, 'Rabbins magiques', *Le Monde*, 20 November 2004, p. 21.