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French Jewry: The End of a Model of Jewish Identity

[By Shmuel Trigano](#)

Abstract: After the Shoah, a new model of Jewish identity was born in France, one that defined itself in relation to the "community", in other words, a Jewish collective destiny, a "Jewish people" that the birth of the State of Israel at the same period came to embody. This was a new type of identity, because France's centralist political culture had never allowed such an identity to come about before. The French political culture only recognizes anonymous individuals as its citizens. The combined events of the unification of Europe (leading to the weakening of Nation-States and national identities) and the simultaneous massive Arab-Muslim immigration made this model of identity impossible. Society no longer supports it but rather delegitimizes it and dissolves it into itself. The antisemitic crisis of the 21st century is only the apparent side of a profound and radical crisis that is putting French Jewishness at a crucial crossroad of its destiny. The article analyzes various possible scenarios for a future posing of the terms of the problem.

Between the end of 2000 and the end of 2001, French Jews experienced a situation they could hardly have imagined some time before. During some long anguishing months, they were victims of 450 attacks in a complete black-out by the media, political authorities and Jewish institutions which were asked by the socialist government not "to add fuel to the fire."

When French Jews tried to alert public opinion and ask for help, they were rudely rebuffed, charged with provocation and racism. They felt they had been abandoned by the government and left in a suddenly foreign society. The antisemitic attacks were not condemned or criticized at the time. Far from it! The French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hubert Vedrines, caused no outcry when he expressed his understanding for the anger of the young Arabs and Muslims in the poor suburban areas at what Israel was doing to the Palestinians. All the attacks, in fact, came from this milieu.

Hostility to Israel concealed the antisemitic phenomenon to the point that it was simply denied. The state prosecutor of a town in southern France discharged and released three men charged with the burning of a synagogue, declaring that the arson "was not the action of antisemites but of three young men with nothing to do."

We had to wait for the return of the right to power - and especially the minister of Interior Nicolas Sarkozy - for a radical change in policy on the part of the government. But

nothing changed in the media.

In the meantime, something has snapped in the consciousness of French Jews. This experience has reminded them of ancient traumas and pushed them to have radical thoughts concerning their future.

The problem of French Jewry is related, of course, to the emergence on the political stage of a new population, including important sectors that carry a latent antisemitism which has been revived by militant fundamentalism. Because the new population is experiencing significant demographic growth, it is being courted by the political parties. French society seems then to have sacrificed the Jews in order not to alienate French Arabs and Muslims. A fatal choice has been made.

A more basic problem also exists: the way French society reacted to these attacks, always beginning by denying, refusing to accept the reality and accusing the Jewish community of being the instigator of aggression. As always, the Jews have been accused of being responsible for the outbreak of antisemitism. The same reaction occurred some years afterwards, in 2006, even after Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy came to power, when the young man Ilan Halimi was murdered. These reactions are the symptom of a profound crisis: a permanent, not temporary, crisis of the Jewish condition in France.

The main accusation against the Jews during those years, and already during the 1990s, informs us about the problem. Indeed, the Jews were largely accused of what is in France a political sin: *communautarisme*. This is a typically French ideological notion, very different from the American communitarianism. The French term signifies that one is at odds with the Republican State and its laws and that one lacks fidelity to the nation. This accusation seems a strange one to make against the Jews, who have been French citizens for a very long time (since 1791 for the Jews in France, and 1870 for the bulk of North African Jewry, the Jews of Algeria). French Judaism, moreover, entered into the national pact with the state in 1807, reconstituting itself so that Jews could perform their duties as individual and anonymous citizens and no more as a community. Consistorial Judaism was born. Napoleon created the "Consistoire" as a unique and obligatory religious institution for the Jews.

My thesis is that the Jewish identity born after World War II is no longer backed up by French society. It became a thing of the past. The Jews are at a crossroads and will have to choose which road they will take. There is, obviously, a hidden dimension to this situation: France itself is facing an important and totally new challenge concerning its identity and state; its future will be determined at the same time. French Jews have the feeling that they are experiencing the last dying light of an entire civilization.

I will try to analyze the nature of that crisis and the evolution of European attitudes towards the Jews. French reactions, in fact, have a sociological-political origin that should also be contextualized within the framework of a more global European attitude toward the Jews.

This evolution has been defined as a *new antisemitism*. It concerns not only the immigrants' fundamentalist circles but also larger French public opinion. This term, *new antisemitism*, refers to a complex attitude which fuses the memory of the Shoah, attacks against the Jews by Muslim activists, the fate of the state of Israel and the Palestinian attack which followed the Oslo agreement.

This is a paradoxical attitude, on the one hand celebrating the Shoah and, on the other hand, accusing Israel of being Nazi, or the Jews of aggression and of abusing the memory of the Shoah. The Jew that the memory of the Shoah recognizes is only a victim, the embodiment of victimhood within humanity. When the Jews step out of this category, they are accused in the name of the morality of the Shoah of being torturers.

A splitting of the Jew in two is occurring here, in a manner reminiscent of Paul in the *Epistle to the Romans*. As a body, the Jew is dead and celebrated, as a living person, he is accused of wickedness. Through this symbolic operation, Europe identifies with the dead body, the victim, in order to exonerate itself. But when the Jew naturally steps outside this pseudo-moral jail, he is no longer recognized but rather excluded, for what are maintained to be the best reasons in the world.

On this basis, there is a symbolic exchange or displacement occurring between the Jewish (dead) victim and the so-called victim of the Jews: the Palestinians, so that European compassion for the victim has been transferred to the "people in danger" as the Palestinians have been called. No longer victims, the Jews became the persecutors of the Palestinians (the so-called "original sin" of the state of Israel), and this permits the Europeans who identify with the victim not to face their own culpability towards the Jews.

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To understand the present situation, it is necessary to understand the framework of the Jewish condition in France. This is not necessarily an easy thing for Americans to understand, living in a federal, continental state constituted by immigrants from all over the world. It is diametrically opposed to the centralist French state, heir to a very integrated and monolithic cultural identity.

In fact, there never has been a place in France for a Jewish identity, for a Jewish community or for any other minority community. Some years ago, the French Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the European charter of regional languages that the French government had just signed, because a "Corsican people" was mentioned and there is no such people within the French Republic. Moreover, a Jewish community did not exist as such until the 1950s, with the exception of the peripheral immigrant community from Eastern Europe after the 1920s. Jews entered citizenship only as individuals and only on condition that they renounce their belonging to the Jewish people and their cultural identity. The concept of a Jewish people is unconstitutional. Nevertheless, that is not the way things actually went in history: the Jews have been regularly suspected of being a community in any case. Some years after the Emancipation, Napoleon constituted them anew as a community, with an obligatory membership to a central religious body, the Central Consistory.

Because of this discrepancy between the formal status of the Jews and their real experience, every forty years there has been an antisemitic crisis in France, beginning with the 1848 revolutions, then the Dreyfus affair, then the 1930s antisemitism, then the Vichy regime which stripped them of their citizenship en masse, as a people. Xavier Vallat, the Vichy commissioner for Jewish affairs, said once that the Jews were a foreign people inside the French people.

The famous saying of De Gaulle about the "Jewish people, sure of themselves and domineering" was the first symptom in post-war France of such a suspicion of the existence of a secret people inside French citizenry; it was the first time such an important leader spoke about the Jews as a people, a cosmopolitan people, with its own agenda related to another state, Israel. De Gaulle, moreover, linked his accusation to the memory

of the Shoah, described as the only basis for recognition of a Jewish people. But, with the crisis of 1968 and his withdrawal from power, his words had no immediate consequences.

There is, of course, a Jewish people: it is a historical fact. The new Jewish identity born in France after World War II assumed this identity. To be more precise, it was born during the war, in the Resistance, when the Jews created in 1944 an autonomous representative body, the CRIF [Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France--Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France]. It is easy to understand why: the Jews had been destroyed as a people despite their individual constitutional status as citizens and nationals. It was no longer possible to deny this reality. The new Jewish identity which was defined as a "Judaism in the public square" [le judaïsme dans la Cité] developed a communal identity, with a presence outside in the public square, in civil society, not only in the synagogue. It was an identity that asserted itself on the social, quasi-political, and educational scenes. It even expressed itself on the cultural scene with the development of a school of Jewish thought, the Parisian Jewish school of thought. "Consistorial" Judaism remained the backbone of this identity, theoretically but also practically, because the CRIF's president was also the Consistoire's president.

Consistorial Judaism is a flexible, Modern Orthodox Judaism accepted by a large spectrum of Jews, so that before the 1980s there were no significant Reform or ultra-Orthodox constituencies. After the separation of church and state, the Jews kept consistorial Judaism voluntarily.

These developments did not provoke any problem in the 1950s and the early 1960s. France was changing under the effects of the Marshall Plan: a process of modernization, urbanization and industrialization was underway.

But this new model of Jewish communal identity is gone today. The landscape has totally changed around the Jewish community. The Jewish community has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of public, national opinion which defines itself as republican.

We arrived at this situation for global reasons at both the European level and at the internal political level. The atmosphere is no longer open to Jewish assertiveness in the public square. To understand why, we need to understand the state of the French nation. The European unification process shook the foundations of the nation-state which gave its framework to European democracy and especially to France. Because of France's centralist spirit the consequences have been stronger there. In France, the State created the nation, while in Germany it was the exact contrary.

Just as national identity was collapsing, a demographic shock was occurring with huge immigration from Arab and Muslim countries (between 5 to 10 million out of a total population of 60 million, the precise number is unknown because in France you cannot ask anyone about his or her religion or origin), a situation complicated by the fundamentalist threat developing throughout the Muslim world. This cast French identity into question as well. The immigrant population has not been integrated--it seems that a part of it does not even want to be--so that it appears as a closed community, endangering the Republic.

From then on, anything that resembled a community was seen as problematic. And thus the Jewish community's communal identity became a problem too. This process began around the mid 1980s and burst out with the first affair of the Islamic veil in 1989, the year of the Bicentennial anniversary of the French Revolution. Islamic fundamentalism was denounced along with Jewish fundamentalism. *Laïcité* [secularism] became a militant

ideology which ended up reversing all the gains that communal identity had obtained from the secular state. The Jewish community has entered a new Ice Age.

This radical change in the status of the Jews was accompanied by two other processes that worked to overthrow the communal model and which can explain recent developments. During his second presidency (beginning in 1985) Francois Mitterrand recruited the Jewish community to serve his new strategy, intended to take over following his renunciation of the socialist program, a new strategy based on the formation of an "anti-fascist" front.

Mitterrand's aim was to pulverize the Right, by making it hostage of the extreme Right, and eventually pulverize his own Socialist party (which really happened in the 2002 elections when it was caught in a pincer movement between the Right and far Left). Mitterrand called on France to transcend the Right-Left divide in order to face a common fascist enemy and defend the Republic, an enemy he had wholly fabricated from start to finish in the person of Jean Marie Le Pen.

The whole of French political life began to be centered on Le Pen. The Jewish community was very much in demand because Mitterrand needed to rally the classical victims of extreme Right antisemitism around his fight against this then artificial threat. Already, the attack on the Rue Copernic Synagogue in 1980, committed by Palestinian terrorists, had been spontaneously attributed to the extreme Right, which paved the way to a series of huge demonstrations against fascism. The desecration of a Jewish cemetery in the town of Carpentras (May 1990) gave way to another such manipulation of public opinion by Mitterrand's government.

This strategy was based on the mobilization of public opinion. The organization SOS-Racisme was created for this purpose. The Jewish student organization played a decisive role in implementing Mitterrand's strategy. This was the beginning of Mitterrand's recruitment of Jewish institutions and opinion for his own purposes.

The slogan "Jews equal immigrants" gave the finishing touches to this picture which was set to haunt France for twenty years. The French people were called upon to fight against anti-Arab racism--which is a reality--on behalf of the struggle against antisemitism. The Jewish community, its institutions, its leadership became the main champions of this identification of Jews with immigrants.

It was a fateful operation for two reasons. The first one is the false idea that the Jewish community is an immigrant community and that it constitutes a political power. The second one is that it provoked among the Arabs a profound resentment. They understood little by little that the Socialist Party and the Jewish leaders of SOS-Racisme had taken them for a ride.

This conflation of the Jews with immigrants fed all sorts of misguided policies. The first affair of the Muslim veil in 1989 was a turning point in this process. The then-positive identification with the immigrants was radically transformed into an accusation and a delegitimization of the Jewish community. The secularist regime that had been flexible in the 1960s became rigid and made it more and more difficult for Judaism to be active on the public square. Even though Islam had been recently institutionalized by the government (with the French Council of Muslim Religion), France did not want to concede to a non-reformed and non-modernized Islam the facilities that had been granted to the old national religions. In order to be fair and politically correct, the public authorities felt it necessary to return the other religions to their status of fifty years before.

The delegitimization of the community is ambiguous because it is while the community is criticized for being tribalist, *communautariste*, it is also held up by the Right and Left alike as a model of integration for new immigrant populations. The community is thus taken as a yardstick of the condition of the Arabs and Muslims, by the public authorities and then used by Muslim fundamentalists as a tool for obtaining privileges. There is no need to say that this permanent comparison increases Arab jealousy of the Jews and makes the Jews responsible for the immigrants' cause, in the eyes of public opinion.

This leveling of conditions objectively weighs in favor of the immigrant community, because it identifies immigrants with a Jewish community which has been a part of national society for two centuries. But it penalizes the Jews for the same reasons and contributes to denationalizing the Jewish community. The discomfort society feels toward immigrants is transferred to the Jews precisely because they are closer to the French and less dangerous. Xenophobia is thus directed against the more feeble other to avoid disturbing the stronger foreigner. The other side of affirmative action or, in French, "positive discrimination" in favor of immigrants is negative discrimination against the others. Here is a good example: since 2000, a new concept for defining the Muslim fundamentalists' attacks against the Jews has been formed: they are now called "intercommunal tensions." Its sole aim is to conjure away the word antisemitism. But this word, used to avoid accusing the immigrants, ex-colonized people, of antisemitism, implies in fact that the Jews, too, are perpetrating aggressive attacks. That is untrue. What protects the Jews, celebrated for their peacefulness, ends up damaging the Jews, accused of aggression and *communautarisme*.

These developments led the government to use the comparison between the Jewish community and the immigrants as a criterion to guarantee public security and deal with the fundamentalist threat.

The inter-religious dialogue which developed over the past ten years is now exploited to maintain public peace. Catholics and Jews, but especially Jews, are very much solicited to give the appearance of peace and harmony between religions in towns and regions throughout the country. The harmony between Jews and Muslims is guided by the government and supposed to enhance public peace.

And so the CRIF, the representative body of the Jewish community, had to meet with UOIF, the Union of Islamic Organizations of France, with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood. The meeting was intended to give this association, known for its antisemitism, a certificate of good behavior and pacifism and set it up as a respectable actor in French society. Some months ago, we had a proof of this lie. During the riots in French suburbs in November 2005, the government asked this organization to make an appeal and call to stop the violence. The UOIF surprised the Ministry of Interior. It issued a *fatwa*, with a lot of Koranic quotations condemning violence. No one (except Muslims) understood the allusions hidden in this text: all of the quotations produced were used in the Koran to condemn *violence by the Jews!* The Jewish community has been used here to exonerate Islamic fundamentalists just as it was used against Le Pen some years before.

Solicited as they were by the government, the Jewish institutions are more and more instrumentalized, and that changes totally the significance of the communal identity in citizenship. This is truly an objective ghettoization (or in French terms a *communautarisation*), a development universally condemned, however, especially by those who are doing it.

This period was characterized also by a problematic evolution of the Jewish institutions

themselves. Their leadership overestimated their power and representativeness. The separation between the functions of CRIF presidency and Consistory presidency in 1980 opened the way to structural rivalry inside the Jewish community itself. The CRIF president thought he had a mandate to intervene on the French political stage or even in the international arena (from a peace plan for Yugoslavia to the recognition of Yasir Arafat in Gaza). This evolution concerned also the Consistoire. Consistorial Judaism was a very important element of Jewish communal identity. It permitted after World War II to keep a link with the classical Republican legitimacy which defined the community in denominational terms and it also constituted an acceptable religiosity for a majority of Jews, due to its centrist orientation (Modern Orthodoxy). That explains why French Jews did not know the American division into sectarian currents. Indeed, the policy initiated by the Chief Rabbinate during the 1990s departed from this centrism towards ultra-Orthodoxy, jeopardizing the institutional and doctrinal basis of post World War II identity.

On the basis of this analysis, I will draw the following conclusions:

1. The existing model of Jewish identity, born after World War II, is no longer applicable. It is no longer harbored by French society and it has suffered a process of decomposition. It lacks the capacity to answer the challenge of a new situation.
2. The commitment to Jewish life which was the fruit of a voluntary and creative choice has become a factor of marginalization, exclusion and inequality.
3. The Jewish community has been instrumentalized despite its wishes in the national politics of France.
4. The representativeness of the French Jews has no real basis any more and in fact no possibility of action. The only role that the government allots to it is one of appeasement and conciliation, in a struggle against racism. But the power that public opinion and government are willing to grant to the CRIF is liable to cause profound misunderstandings. The communal institutions have the image of power but not the means.
5. The Jewish community is gradually being isolated within society, imperceptibly excluded from national life, and ghettoized. When recognized, it is considered only as a separate or alien community and such a recognition jeopardizes each Jew's citizenship. This was hardly the direction it was taking when the new Jewish identity was founded in the 1950s.

Obviously the answers to these challenges depend to a large extent on developments that are underway in society, outside the control of the Jewish community. The future of French Jewry is at stake.

Based on these developments, let us assess possible scenarios, each of which will include the two basic factors I have already described: the decline of the nation-state and the demographic clash.

The combination of these two elements yields four possible scenarios:

1. The republican model is strengthened and the immigrants accept it;
2. The republican model is strengthened but the immigrants do not accept it and fundamentalism gets the upper hand among them while xenophobia progresses;
3. The republican model evolves and undergoes a revolutionary transformation. That will be the end of the centralist political tradition and the triumph of

multiculturalism. The immigrants will become a quasi-national minority in a Europe of diverse peoples. There will no longer be a problem of national identity for France.

4. Nothing changes and the situation worsens. The Jewish community will break up under the impact of repeated clashes.

To face these challenges the Jewish community has only two possibilities: to adapt or resist.

From the standpoint of future viability, the fourth scenario is totally negative: not only will the delegitimization of the community deepen but insecurity will increase for individuals.

What about the three other scenarios? They hardly paint a glowing picture insofar as the continuity of communal identity is concerned.

Let us consider the first scenario, the reassertion of a strong republican model. That is the only strategy defended by the Jews today. It will condemn the Jewish community to disappearance because Jewish continuity will become a major symbolic obstacle to strengthening national unity. The Jews, par excellence, will have to be the example, by dissolving their community.

The alternative is therefore between the disappearance of the community and its transformation into a ghetto. The Jews are commonly accused already, just by being openly Jewish, of a tribal withdrawal into themselves, a regression into their own communal identity [*repli communautaire*]. Such a scenario seems to me impossible due to the European unification process, which is still underway (even if it has slowed down somewhat), and which must be taken into account.

The second scenario describes a status quo in the republican model and a drift in the immigrant community towards separatism. In this case, the situation can only worsen for the Jews. The hard core of the Jewish community will remain and become the focus of extreme tension and trouble. Like a boat without a rudder, it will be smashed in the storms of events to come. The Jews will flee the community. Only those who do not have any option to distance themselves from the community will maintain their membership (that is already the case: the Jewish societal elites have already abandoned the community, which became too heavy for them to carry in their careers.)

The third scenario describes the transformation of the republican model in the framework of a European federalism. In this case, the Jewish community will tend to become more and more an ethnic minority in danger of being marginalized by other more powerful minorities. The decline of the state as a referee and guarantor of the equality of rights of individuals will bring with it a decline in the civic equality of Jews. This development is already at work in party politics. It was evident already in 2001 in the Socialist party with a controversial report (by Pascal Boniface) recommending that the Socialists neglect the Jewish electorate and court the Arab-Muslim one.

It is significant that the three most important candidates for the presidency represent these options and do not open other ways. The Socialist Segolene Royal tends obviously to the third scenario. Nicolas Sarkozy oscillates between the strengthening of republican centralism and the *communautariste* model. He was much more pro-multiculturalism before the campaign than later. It seems that Bayrou, the centrist candidate, will tend toward strengthening the republican model. That is also true in the case of Le Pen, but his

Republic would be in fact an authoritarian state.

In conclusion, French Jewry is today at a crossroads. Its fate will be decided in the coming years. The present situation which began in around 2000 is transitory and one of the scenarios will necessarily triumph. But the fate of French Jewry is not the sole one at stake. The main question is the future of the French national idea, of the Republic, as it was imagined two centuries ago. Can France change without disappearing?

NOTES

[1] I have analyzed this complex process in one of my recent books, *Auschwitz Frontiers* (2005) and more basically in *L'Idéal démocratique à l'épreuve de la Shoah* [The Democratic Ideal: The Test of the Shoah], to be published soon in English by SUNY press.

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