



[Home](#) > [Articles](#) > [The Future of the Jews in France](#)

The Future of the Jews in France

Prof. Shmuel Trigano, August 15, 2006

Filed Under: [Anti-Semitism](#), [World Jewry](#)



No 11,

- There are approximately 550,000 Jews in France. About 60 percent live in the Paris region, mainly in suburban areas. In Paris itself, the number of Jews is shrinking with the exception of the capital's west. Marseilles is the second largest Jewish agglomeration in France. There, too, most Jews live in the suburbs. As in the Paris environs, many Jews are poor, either unemployed or low-income. The next largest Jewish communities are Lyon and Strasbourg.
- Among the Jewish institutions in France, three occupy central positions. The Consistoire Central de France (Consistoire) deals with religious issues; the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU) addresses social concerns; and the Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France (CRIF) is the roof organization of France's major Jewish institutions.
- The major Jewish organizations in France are in crisis. The organizational model that has served the French community in the past decades is no longer viable. It is unclear whether a new workable model will emerge that can replace it.

The Jews: A Screen for French Society

"In view of the current prejudices against the Jews in France, they have become a kind of screen on which the French project their distress and their expectations. For that reason, assessing French Jewry and its identity also becomes an analysis of French society."

In his new book, *The Future of the Jews in France*,¹ Shmuel Trigano analyzes the Jewish community's situation in the context of its national environment. He claims this situation is influenced by several major factors including the crisis in French national identity and the demographic shock resulting from large-scale immigration, mainly from North and West Africa. At the same time, several major Jewish institutions are undergoing crisis. In Trigano's view, these and other developments have fundamentally changed French Jewry's position in the societal landscape.

Trigano teaches sociology at the University of Paris X-Nanterre. The author of many books, he founded L'Observatoire du Monde Juif, a research center on Jewish political life. Trigano is also the editor of the magazines *Pardes* and *Controverses*.

Sixty Percent of Jews in Paris and Its Suburbs

"There are approximately 550,000 Jews in France. About 60 percent live in the Paris region, mainly in suburban areas. In Paris itself the number of Jews is shrinking with the exception of the capital's west.

"Jews who live in more dangerous city neighborhoods and have the means to move increasingly relocate to Paris's 16th district and to western suburbs such as Neuilly-sur-Seine. These are considered more bourgeois but also less dangerous for Jews, with relatively low numbers of Arab North African immigrants. The northern and eastern suburbs have always been more proletarian, and the southern ones somewhere in between.

"Marseilles is the second largest Jewish agglomeration in France. There, too, most Jews live in the suburbs. As in the Paris environs, there is a Jewish population that is poor, either unemployed or low-income. The next largest Jewish communities are Lyon and Strasbourg."

Major Institutions

Trigano says that among the Jewish institutions in France, three occupy central positions. The Consistoire Central de France (Consistoire) deals with religious issues; the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU) addresses social concerns; and the Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France (CRIF) is the roof organization of France's major Jewish institutions.

"In terms of number of adherents, the Consistoire is the largest. This institution dates from the days of Napoleon and the Sanhedrin that he convened. At that time, all Jews were forced to belong to the Consistoire. It has a central body as well as regional ones.

"The Consistoire considers as adherents all those who have made a contribution during the year, whatever its size. These include, for instance, those who have given money, however little, on the occasion of being called to the Torah, or registering their children for a Jewish course, or paying for a wedding to be performed. One then becomes a member of

the Consistoire and can vote.

"That does not make one a very active member. In the elections for the Paris Consistoire, however, not more than about six thousand people vote among thirty-three thousand members."

Indicators of Decline

"There are various indicators of decline in the Consistoire's status. Other religious communities are emerging. There are now numerous modern-Orthodox communities, mainly in the Parisian suburbs, which have synagogues with their own rabbis and do not belong administratively to the Consistoire. Many have united in the Council of Jewish Communities, created in 1992. It has a tense relationship with the Consistoire. The CRIF did not want to accept this body as a member, though it represents a large part of the Jews living in Parisian suburbs.

"The Lubavitch (Habad) Hasidic group has seen much development owing to the fervor of its adherents and their strong commitment to outreach. The previous president of the Paris Consistoire, Moise Cohen, proposed to them to enter the Consistoire and they agreed, which is rather odd because they do not accept its kashrut and operate their own.

"The Habad movement has about twenty synagogues in Paris. Although very active, it is not so important in terms of numbers. It has also succeeded in attracting Sephardi Jews. I attended the bar mitzvah of the son of a friend, who is of Moroccan origin. The boy gave his speech in Yiddish not understanding a word of what he was saying."

Non-Orthodox Communities

"Since the 1980s the non-Orthodox communities have also developed. The Reform movement is rather fragmented. One of its oldest synagogues is in the Rue Copernic in Paris. The Reform synagogues seem to be frequented mainly by people who were remote from Jewish tradition and have found a way to identify, as well as others who were dissatisfied by the religious radicalization of the Consistoire. Reform's openness to conversion is another reason it attracts membership.

"The Consistoire, for its part, has changed since the Tunisian-born Joseph Sitruk became Chief Rabbi of France in 1987. He and many rabbis, often of Moroccan origin, have aligned themselves with Israel's ultra-Orthodox Sephardi party, Shas.

"Conservative synagogues now function in Paris, Marseilles, Nice, and other cities. This phenomenon shows an increase in recent years. Like the Reform synagogues, they draw some of their participants from those who have left the Consistoire.

"In France, there is no Reform or Conservative tradition as in the United States. These movements are certainly alien to the world of North African Jews, but a population that has never received any tradition joins more easily. These groups are not represented toward the state, which only recognizes the Consistoire's Chief Rabbi as the Jewish religious authority."

The Weakening of the Consistoire Kashrut System

"Another indicator of decline is the competition with the Consistoire's kashrut system. It is under attack in various ways. The Chief Rabbi does not eat the meat slaughtered under the supervision of the Consistoire's Rabbinical Court of which he is the guarantor.

"Last year, the Chief Rabbi announced a plan to have animals slaughtered in Ireland and have their meat prepacked. This meat would be available in general supermarkets. That would deal a major blow to the Consistoire's main source of income; it draws most of its funds from the taxes that butchers, restaurants, grocers, and producers of kosher products pay to it as a supervisor of kashrut. The Chief Rabbi's aim to create a rabbinical tribunal under the authority of an Israeli ultra-Orthodox rabbi will also undermine the Consistoire's legitimacy. All these are further indications of the community's fragmentation."

The FSJU

"The Fonds Social is the major Jewish organization dealing with social work. It raises funds through a unified appeal. In recent years, collecting money for *tzedaka* (charity) has become the FSJU's principal task. It mainly publicizes its support for needy Jews in France, such as the unemployed, the handicapped, single-parent families, and so on. It no longer emphasizes that a percentage of the money that is raised goes to Israel. This is an important sign of the ideological evolution.

"Many Israeli organizations nowadays raise money in France directly. For instance, the various Israeli universities have their organizations of friends. An organization such as Hadassah raises money, and so do many yeshivas. The Chief Rabbi of France also has his own fund.

"In the past, operating community centers was a major FSJU activity. The 1970s were the years of glory for these centers. They came into being largely modeled on the general cultural centers initiated by the then French minister of culture and well-known writer, André Malraux. These have declined in importance and so have the Jewish community centers. Furthermore, their relationship with the FSJU has loosened, though they still remain in its orbit."

The CRIF

Trigano recalls that the CRIF was created in 1944 when under German occupation there was no legitimate French state. The CRIF aimed to represent the Jews, as the National Resistance Council sought to represent France.

In an earlier interview, Trigano said that initially the CRIF sought "to be the representative body of French Jews; but this was impossible in a very centralistic state. Thus it became the representative body of Jewish institutions, i.e. the organized community."²

Now he adds: "Until the early 1980s, the president of the Consistoire was also usually president of the CRIF. Hence there

was no need to define the political and religious spheres separately. When the two positions were dissociated, a mistaken image was created. Many believed that the CRIF represented the political dimension of the Jewish community, while the Consistoire continued to embody the religious dimension.

"This was never true. The Consistoire is managed by lay leaders. It employs rabbis, but is embodied by these lay leaders who are not necessarily Orthodox. Instead, the separation of the two top positions can be viewed as a division of the Jewish lay leadership.

"A further distorted image was created when Theo Klein became the CRIF chairman in 1981. He involved the Jewish institutions in national politics and gave the impression that the Jewish community was a political power. This disturbed a delicate equilibrium.

"The crucial point here is that France is a highly centralist democracy. Hence the Jewish community, which is politically active, has to be organized in this way. Yet it is impossible – for the same reason – to pretend that the CRIF, which is not democratically elected by French Jews, represents the political interests of the entire French Jewish community."

The CRIF's Representativity

Trigano observes: "Jews are private citizens who do not and cannot control the body that claims to represent them politically. The CRIF is a federation of institutions. As such it can only represent these and not any institutions that do not belong to it. Nor does it speak on behalf of individuals, even less all French Jews. It is also evident that people who do not feel themselves represented by the CRIF or other bodies do not stop being Jews. The Consistoire, the main organization of French Jewry, is not today a member of the CRIF.

"The CRIF can only represent those major Jewish concerns on which a broad consensus exists. As a voluntary body, it can legitimately defend Jewish interests of this kind.

"However, over the past twenty years, the CRIF helped create the illusion that it was the political representative of all French Jews. When dealing with the Jews, the government addressed the CRIF. This old model is already disintegrating to some extent because France faces such a major overall crisis. The progress of European unification endangers the centralistic state, and the simultaneous influx of immigrants threatens France's national identity.

"In future the community model of French Jewry may disintegrate even further as a result of both internal and external developments. Internally, the tensions between Jewish lay and religious leaders are increasing."

Condemning All Religions

"As far as the external environment was concerned, the headscarf problem emerged in 1989 for the first time in the town of Creil. There a number of Muslim girls insisted on wearing the headscarf in schools. In reaction, a very demanding, almost intolerant, secularism developed in French society. Also parts of the Jewish elite started to condemn the Jewish community, accusing it of 'communitarism.' Until then, the issue of the Jews belonging to a specific community had not been a major one, even if occasionally there were some tensions.

"In 1989 the French Republic celebrated its two hundredth anniversary. The intelligentsia and media wanted to condemn Islam without appearing to do so. To remain politically correct and avoid stressing that the enemy was Islamism, they invented other enemies – and thus condemned all religions.

"Many secular Jews strongly opposed all fundamentalisms. The French Jewish Left also started to attack the Jewish world, characterizing many of its elements as fundamentalist. These included Israeli settlers, religious Jews, Jewish communitarism, and religious intolerance.

"In this way part of the Jewish elite turned against the Jewish community. This may lead to an unmanageable situation. It marked the beginning of the decomposition of the Jewish communal structure of the postwar period. Yet a Jewish community in a democratic regime – and not a ghetto – has to be present in all social strata."

The Consistoire Leaves the CRIF

"Around that time the Consistoire left the CRIF. There were personal rivalries involved, but these were not the only factor. Emile Touati, the then president of the Consistoire, opposed the CRIF joining the new European Jewish Congress. He considered that its policy would be determined by the parent World Jewish Congress, and did not want American Jews to have influence in French affairs.

"There had long been a French section of the World Jewish Congress, but it was mainly known for financing an annual symposium of Jewish intellectuals. This gathering lost its significance when several leading French Jewish intellectuals, such as André Néher, Léon Ashkenazi, Eliane Amado Lévi-Valensi, Benno Gross, and Théo Dreyfuss, left for Israel. In that league, only Emanuel Levinas remained in France. Many activists emigrated as well.

"Looking back, we now know that the 1970s were intellectually a golden age. French Jewry then had an intellectual dimension. The community centers were full. Lectures often drew hundreds of people."

The Community Adrift

"The community's decline during the 1980s was in line with what happened in French society during the Mitterrand presidency. In those years, France sank under the weight of a new political strategy.

"Initially, the Socialists' coming to power in 1981 was received very positively by most French Jews, including myself. Some Jews believed that the 'Jewish vote' had helped the Socialist candidate win. This, though, is a myth: if there is a Jewish vote at all, it only exists in two or three Parisian suburbs.

"De Gaulle had stigmatized the Jews, calling them in 1967 'a domineering and arrogant people.' Since then it had become

clear that the authorities were taking aim at the Jewish community, claiming it had a dual loyalty to France and to Israel. De Gaulle also moved France toward a pro-Arab policy.

"His successor as president, Georges Pompidou, had imposed an embargo on the delivery of Mirage combat planes that had been sold to Israel. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who became president in 1974, had been very cold to the Jewish community.

"The initial hopes were also inspired by the fact that several Jewish personalities close to Mitterrand were on the board of the FSJU. In the Jewish community a new leadership was emerging that, unlike the postwar generation, did not have serving the Jewish community as its major aim. Many new leaders used the Jewish community to promote their own political or professional careers.

"The main problem for the Jews with Mitterrand's presidency was that he used the Jewish community as a political tool in his antifascist front strategy. Against Le Pen, a danger he created artificially, he indeed needed the Jews' support to give credibility to his maneuver. This politicization of the Jewish community proved later to have pernicious consequences."

Under Attack

"Parts of the Jewish community have been criticizing the CRIF from several directions. Its silence during the 2001 anti-Semitic attacks jeopardized its status as representing the community. Under fire, its leadership failed.

"Part of the intelligentsia and the Jewish elites dislike the CRIF because they see it as a model for turning the Muslims into a community. In recent years, many in these circles have become the greatest advocates of French republican centralism while distancing themselves from Israel.

"Nowadays, the CRIF creates illusions with little substance behind them. Although eighteen ministers were present at its annual dinner this year, it has been amply shown that the CRIF has difficulty influencing the French authorities apart perhaps from the problem of anti-Semitism. It has not succeeded in changing the government's Middle East policy to any extent. The CRIF might evolve into a body similar to the Anti-Defamation League in the United States. Then it could make a concerted effort against anti-Semitism in France.

"If French Jews want true political representation, there is no other alternative than emigration to Israel. In the Diaspora, at least in France, there is a sharp dichotomy between Jewish affiliation and citizenship. Only in Israel is it possible to be 'Jewish' and democratically represented simultaneously.

"A strong manifestation of the CRIF's aberrations was that after the murder of a young Jew, Ilan Halimi, by West African Muslims in early 2006 and several attacks on Jews in the Parisian suburbs, the organization published a communiqué called 'France Is in Danger.' It warns the government that if no action is taken against anti-Semitism, parts of the Jewish community may become violent. One wonders if this is the CRIF's role."

The Problem of State Financial Support

"In France, far more of society's activities are financed by the state than in other countries. Many synagogues, for example, are monuments, and as such entitled to subsidy. The CRIF in Marseilles receives 79 percent of its financing from the central and regional governments. Thus voluntary organizations meant to represent Jewish interests are in fact, through their financing, influenced by the authorities.

"Contrary to the United States, numerous French Jewish schools are also financed by the state. They have to sign an agreement that they will teach according to the national curriculum. That leaves only six hours per week for teaching Jewish matters. Some Lubavitch schools do not accept this and thus receive no money. Many resemble the old cheder, not teaching mathematics or the French language.

"Once again the problem is not a specifically Jewish one. French newspapers and many other private organizations could not survive without government subsidies."

The Future

"According to a survey by Erik Cohen of Bar-Ilan University and Maurice Ifergan, perhaps a Jewish population of thirty thousand will emigrate. In 2003, 2,100 French Jews moved to Israel; in 2004, 2,415; and in 2005 the figure reached 3,000. This year, estimates are that about 3,500 will arrive.³ The importance lies not only in the numbers. These are very conscious Jews; many of those who want an intense Jewish life are attracted by Israel.

"Another factor influencing the community's future is that mixed marriages are on the increase. A new population will not be totally Jewish and not totally non-Jewish, neither converted out nor accepted for conversion by the Jewish community, but retaining a vague sense of belonging to the Jewish people. From these circles new types of Judaism, often of a syncretic nature, will inevitably emerge and further destabilize Jewish identity.

"Another important phenomenon is the increasing silent ghettoization. Because of the many problems in the public schools, more and more pupils are joining Jewish schools. Whereas in the past this was a voluntary choice, expressing affiliation, nowadays it is more and more an expression of fear and insecurity.

"This ghettoization, however, is drawing people into the community. The challenge facing French Jews, even more than the Muslim-Arab anti-Semitism, is to cultivate a sense of belonging to the Jewish people while totally remaining part of the French nation. At stake, in other words, is the legitimacy of a Jewish community."

Trigano concludes that the post-World War II model of French Jewish identity is in crisis in France. In his view, the organizational model that served the French community in the past decades is no longer valid. He adds: "It is unclear whether a new workable model will emerge to replace it."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

* * *

Notes

1. Shmuel Trigano, *L'Avenir des Juifs en France* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2006). [in French]
2. Manfred Gerstenfeld, interview with Shmuel Trigano, "France: Memory versus Truth," in *Europe's Crumbling Myths: The Post-Holocaust Origins of Today's Anti-Semitism* (Jerusalem: JCPA, Yad Vashem, World Jewish Congress, 2003), 210.
3. Zohar Blumenkrantz and Amiram Barkat, "2,500 American, French Immigrants to Arrive This Summer," *Haaretz*, 14 May 2006.

* * *

Prof. Shmuel Trigano is a fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and professor of sociology at the University of Paris X-Nanterre. He is director of the College of Jewish Studies at the Alliance Israélite Universelle; editor of Pardes, a journal of Jewish studies, and of Controverses, a journal of ideas; as well as author of numerous books, especially on Jewish philosophy and Jewish political thought. Trigano is also the founder of L'Observatoire du Monde Juif, a research center on Jewish political life.

Publication: [Changing Jewish Communities](#)

Filed Under: [Anti-Semitism](#), [World Jewry](#)

Tags: [Communities](#), [Community](#), [CRIF](#), [France](#), [Future](#), [Jews](#)

About Prof. Shmuel Trigano

Professor Shmuel Trigano is professor of sociology at the University of Paris-Nanterre . He is director of the College of Jewish Studies at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, editor of Pardes, a journal of Jewish studies. Prof. Trigano is also the founder of L'Observatoire du Monde Juif, a research center on Jewish political life.

[view all posts by Prof. Shmuel Trigano](#) →

© 2015 All rights reserved.