

BEING A JEWISH WOMAN IN FRENCH SOCIETY

by Regine Azria

Like the United States, France has enjoyed the privileges and benefits of a Revolution. This revolution led to a non-totalitarian regime, opened the gates of society and gave positive social recognition to individuals and groups previously relegated to subordinate – even despised – positions and status. French people are very proud of their revolutionary past and of their authorship of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. It is not an overstatement to say that French Revolution was the genesis and still is the hallmark of modern France. The Revolution gave legitimacy to practices of French political culture still relevant today.



Perhaps it is because of this glorious self-image that the French thought they were free from having to be the leaders of a gender revolution. But if the French led in the field of political democracy, this is far less true as far as the women's struggle for equality is concerned. France did not give women the right to vote until 1944. Thanks to the Separation law which established the principle of *laïcité*, state institutions were released from the yoke of religion. But this did not prevent the state from holding onto a traditional attitude with regard to gender issues. Despite a long and passionate national debate, initiated in 1998 by the socialist government about the necessity of legislating male/female parity on the electoral lists of the competing parties, women are still tremendously under-represented in French political life: while constituting 53% of the French electorate, women represented no more than 6% of the deputies elected in 1995. By contrast, 40% of the deputies in Sweden at the time were women.¹

While the chivalrous tradition of courtesy so highly praised by lovers of French culture was slowly vanishing, sexism (the dark side of this tradition) has persisted with concrete effects in public and private everyday life. Until very recently, gender issues and the will for real change have met with a general lack of concern. Feminism and gender directed actions have hardly been welcomed in France. At the same time, women are far from being marginal actors in French public life. One may deplore the fact that they still are too often excluded from high rank administration positions and from the leadership of too many firms and companies. One may deplore that they are more vulnerable to labor market fluctuations and more massively touched (together with young people) by unemployment and retrenchment. One may deplore the persistence of inequalities in wages, status and work conditions. However, one must also note significant and encouraging evolutions, such as their upward professional mobility and the subsequent access of a growing number of women to prestigious sectors and positions. This progress has already led to a significant feminization of some previously exclusive male sectors, particularly medicine and research, as well as the legal professions.

How does French Jewry fit into this picture?

¹ Cf. *L'Etat de la France 97-98, Paris, la Découverte, 1997, p. 86*

The Jewish population in France is estimated at about 600,000 people.² Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, this is the third largest Jewish population in the world, after the United States and Israel. Yet French Jews represent 0.9% – less than one per cent – of the total French population. This population is ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, composed partly of European *ashkenazi* Jews and partly of north-African *sephardi* Jews.

In the aftermath of decolonization (the 1950s-1970s), France was the site of a meeting between two types of Judaism and two types of Jewish experience: the experience of native, emancipated French so-called *Israelites* on the one side, and the experience of Jewish immigrants on the other. The *Israelites* were, on the whole, less observant, more assimilated Jews. Many of the immigrants were more traditional and community-centered, holding conceptions of Judaism and Jewishness that were quite distinct from those of the old-timers. This was a historical meeting between two Jewish worlds, cultures and populations which had never met before and hardly knew each other. Since they would have to share a unified Jewish institutional space and framework, they would have to adjust to each other.

This meeting between *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim* had enormous concrete consequences for the organization and further evolution of Jewish life in France which I cannot elaborate on here. Did it influence the lives of Jewish women of both sides? Probably, as they learned from each other. But owing to an increasing number of *ashkenazi* and *sephardi* intermarriages and to a steady process of assimilation of the *Sephardim* to French cultural norms, one may expect that the young generations, if they still identify as Jews and do not marry out, will consider themselves simply as Jews or French Jews, sharing a common global Jewish heritage.

As far as women are concerned, this evolution is already perceptible in the private domestic sphere, where intergenerational transmission and cultural exchanges involving daughter/mother, daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relations are carried out. It is particularly noticeable in the diversification of the ways of cooking and choosing ethnic and/or kosher food, in the ways of preparing Jewish festivals with mixed rituals, in the ways of educating children, in body care, and in the observance of purity laws.

With all these preliminary features to consider, it is quite difficult to speak definitively on Jewish women in France. The main reason is the clear lack of data. Because of the cultural conditioning I have mentioned, there are few French scholars involved in gender or feminist studies and, all the more, in Jewish women studies. Therefore, there are few relevant surveys, inquiries, or ethnological or documentary materials on these matters and issues. I myself am not a specialist in these disciplines and when I happen to meet gender related issues, it generally is “by the way” rather than head-on.

As French citizens and members of French society, Jewish women share the current condition of all Jews in France. French lawyer and former president of the *Conseil Constitutionnel* (the equivalent of the U.S. Supreme Court) Robert Badinter would say they are “free and equal.” Antisemitism is not, for the time being, a major or central concern in France, supplanted as it is by anti-Arab xenophobia and racism.

² 525,000 according to the *American Jewish Year Book of 1997*; and 700,000 according to the Sofrès 1977 estimate.

As women, Jewish women share the condition of any women living in France. Just as in any other open democratic and liberal meritocracy, their political, economic or social status depends mainly on their personal merit and on life opportunities, rather than on their being Jewish or not. The list of French Jewish female celebrities is long and includes such people as politician Simone Weil, journalist Anne Sinclair, the late popular singer Barbara, writer Nathalie Sarraute, lawyer Josette Halimi, and many others.

Despite socio-cultural gaps related to age and country of origin, Jews living in France are overwhelmingly middle-class people, whether they inhabit the city or suburbs. Second and third generation Jewish women have reached a high level of education, have fewer children than their mothers and grand-mothers (except for the minority of ultra-orthodox) and have a fairly high rate of divorce. On all three counts, their rates are distinct from French averages. As Israeli demographer Sergio Della Pergola put it: through their demographic characteristics, Jewish women anticipate and mark in a more pronounced way than any other category of population, some of the most significant demographic trends of modernity.

One should remember that France has a tradition of hierarchy and centralization, that goes back to the Monarchy. The *ancien régime*'s propensity toward centralism was reinforced by the administrative netting of France by Napoleon I. At that time, Jews were made to organize as a religious minority within a centralized framework, taking the Catholic Church as its model. But rapidly, the inner dynamics of Jewish life, complicated by new groups of immigrants, burst out of this narrow, one-dimensional framework. A diversity of Jewish organizations and associations appeared, each one having its own purpose and definition of its mission: religious or secular, social, political, educational, cultural or philanthropic, ethnic, etc. Within this plethora of institutions, Jewish women found their roles depending on the degree of conservatism or openness to women participation. They functioned as members, militants, professionals and decision makers. Only rarely were they leaders except of women's associations such as WIZO or *Coopération féminine* (the Women's branch of the Jewish Appeal).

Wherever they are involved, Jewish women tend to be active and effective, particularly in fund raising, Jewish philanthropy, and care of children and the aged. However, as more and more young Jewish women become professionally active, they also become quantitatively less committed to the Jewish community than their elders. On the whole, non-married young women (and men) feel largely unconcerned with community participation.

This development ties into the French culture of individualism, which generally leads to a practice of non-affiliation within French society. Community-building and identification with community is not "politically correct" in France. It is at the heart of the current very intense political debate on national identity and immigration, in which some participants deny any rights or legitimacy to infra-national groupings based on ethnicity or religio-ethnic criteria.

This national cultural ideology seems to have been internalized by many Jews, judging by their very low rate of affiliation and participation in Jewish community-life. Less than one of every two French Jews are affiliated in some way with a Jewish organization and less than 20% are regular community participants. Therefore it would be quite misleading to identify the French Jewish population with the French Jewish community. And therefore too, it would be at least as misleading to limit an analysis of French Jewry to community-involved individuals, whether men or women.

Non-affiliated Jews (men and women), and/or intermittent community-life participants, which constitute the majority of the French Jewish population, deserve particular attention because they are representative not only of mainstream French Jewry but of a large part of Diaspora Jewry. Owing to their lack of visibility and to their apparent lack of Jewish specificity, they have been largely ignored by scholars and thus less investigated. Yet, they are the most critical and problematic agents of transmission of Jewish identity. As such we cannot ignore them. Their attitudes toward Judaism, Jewish involvement and Jewish transmission, are to be decisive for the future as they represent the larger part of the Jewish people. In particular we cannot ignore the women who are part of this non-affiliated Jewish population.³

Young Jewish women's level of secular education is universally high in France. We lack precise figures but one can assert that consistent progress is noticeable from one generation to the next. Especially among *sephardic* Jews, the educational gap between mothers and daughters is quite impressive. The proportion of young women and girls brought up in traditional families whose mothers could hardly read but who are themselves attending university or higher education institutes, is quite large.

By contrast, the level of *Jewish* education is universally low, both for boys and girls. Less than 20% of school-age Jewish children attend full-time Jewish schools. In many of these schools, especially in ultra-orthodox ones, the quality of the teaching, both Jewish and secular, is poor. This is because of a lack of well-trained teachers in Jewish disciplines; but also because of the marginalization of general culture in the curricula of the Jewish schools.

Nevertheless, general and Jewish education is still the most natural channel for women's advancement, even within Jewish community institutions. There are two factors that offset the weaknesses of French Jewish educational institutions. The first is the availability of post-graduate training, whether within the framework of non-religious state institutions (universities, the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, or *l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*) offering classes on Jewish subjects; or in the framework of private institutions such as the Institut catholique, the *Centre universitaire d'Études juives (Cuej)* or the recently created *Institut André Neher* for the formation of Jewish teachers. The second factor is the availability of Jewish training abroad whether in Israel, in England (Leo Baeck Institute, Jews' College) or in America.

Well-trained women account for a considerable part of the Jewish teaching profession in France. The massive feminization of this sector, traditionally held by male teachers and professors, is due of course to the opening of Jewish learning to women, but also to the fact that the position of teacher in a Jewish school has never been awarded high social status in the Jewish world. Even nowadays, in societies where school education is central, the prestige of intellectual knowledge does not compensate for low wages and the enduring poor image of Jewish teachers. When they have a choice and if they are not prompted by strong Jewish motivations, most well-trained male professionals prefer to work outside the Jewish community's labor-market. In the present French context of unemployment, however, many male professionals have no choice but to work in Jewish institutions.

³ For more about non-affiliated Jewish families living far away from any organized Jewish community – mainly in distant suburbs or in the countryside, see Regine Azria. 1998 “*Juifs des villes, juifs des champs*” *Cahiers du judaïsme*, 3:42-55

The feminization of many professional sectors in France must be seen as an ambiguous phenomenon: its positive side is real progress; its negative side is that often means a lowering, according to general French standards, of the sector's prestige and social image.

Relatively easy access to knowledge – particularly to Jewish traditional knowledge denied them for ages by religious authorities, – has not given French Jewish women noticeably better access to direct religious participation or to power. They are still not able to count as part of a *minyan*, publicly read from the Torah, or conduct synagogue services. They cannot aspire to religious authority (access to the rabbinate or rabbinical courts), despite the fact that, according to the Jewish tradition, a sound knowledge in Jewish sacred matters entitles a person to claim such religious authority.

In France, the only women in the religious establishment are the Reformed/Liberal synagogue's *Talmud Torah* supervisor Colette Kessler, and first and only female Rabbi, Pauline Bèbe (trained in England). This congregation was established only a few years ago. Contrary to the North-American situation, Liberal and Reform Jews do not represent a major religious force or trend within French Judaism, despite the fact that they have met with an increasing popularity within the last decade. Since its creation in 1907, the synagogue and its rabbis have been systematically ostracized by consistorial main-stream rabbinical authorities.

Actually, French Jewish women have sometimes forced their way through, as women and as Jews. Traditionalist, orthodox or secularized, most have extra-domestic activities and their fellow-men cannot but acknowledge their competence. The last citadel is the Jewish orthodox establishment and its rabbinical representation.

An unprecedented event happened in France in November of 1997. For the first time in the *Consistoire's* history, four women stood as candidates for its Council election. In itself, this challenge to male exclusive authority and power was the unequivocal expression of a deep change in Jewish women's mentality and of quite a new attitude. But there was close to a revolution when the scores were publicly announced. The four women were elected to the first five positions (1, 2, 3, 5), which implied that they could also run for the presidency of the *Consistoire*. The Jewish religious electorate had expressed its readiness for change but, as expected, the rabbinical authorities immediately reacted through the channel of the rabbinical court. To explain their veto, they argued that the tradition of women's non-involvement in community management should be preserved. None of the women ran for the presidency of the *Consistoire*.

Confronted by the enduring double sexism of French political culture and Jewish tradition alike, the positions and roles of women within French Jewish life reflect their positions and roles in French society. A majority of Jewish women are not involved in Jewish life. A minority of those affiliated participate as benevolent militants or professionals, especially in the social and educational fields. A few women are community or association leaders or holders of honorific titles. Yet, as happens in French society as a whole, one notices a significant presence of those who are involved in Jewish life and a steady progress of their presence in key and central institutions at higher levels of responsibility and prestige.

These remarks should not obscure the fact that much of Jewish life transpires at home and that despite the generalization of women's working outside, women still have a key role in the domestic realm. Jewish socialization and transmission to children is on the responsibility of both fathers and mothers, but mainly mothers. How does that work in every day life? We have very little hard data about it.