

“The Coffin or the Suitcase” *or* Republican Defiance for French Jews

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In the face of growing anti-Semitic violence led by radical homegrown Islamists in France, the emigration of French Jews to Israel has increased dramatically. From 2013 to 2014, emigration increased by 120%. The French Revolution promised security and inclusion for French Jews, but anti-Semitic waves of violence and betrayal have pushed French Jews to question the Republic and its capacity to protect them. As a result, through time, French Jews have become more Zionist in nature and have begun emigrating to Israel in larger numbers. In this paper, I will discuss the effect of recent violent attacks on life in France for French Jews, the reaction of both the Israeli and French governments and the general sentiment of defiance from French Jews following these attacks. Here, I will argue that French Jews have developed a dual allegiance to both the French Republic and Zionism, consistent with a desire to stay in France. Despite growing fear, the coffin, surrounding the rise of radical Islam in France, French Jews are forgoing emigration, the suitcase, for support of the Republic and its values.

Background: Emancipation of European Jews Versus Zionism

During the late eighteenth century, there were approximately 2 and a half million Jews in the world, with almost 90% of them living in Europe. In Europe, Jews experienced discrimination in the form of forced conversions, exclusion from public service positions and the threat of cultural annihilation. Following the French Revolution, the ideals of the Enlightenment – liberty, fraternity, equality – ushered in a new approach toward the Jews, giving them full citizenship and equality before the law. The subsequent period allowed Jews to gain access to central parts of society, working in professions of wholesale and trade, showing an increased presence in universities and contributing to science and culture. In this way, Jews became increasingly assimilated in European countries. More importantly, Jews espoused the values of

the Republic. Indeed, “secularization became a cornerstone in the drive of Jews to be part of a society based on equality before the law, separation of church and state and the national loyalty of citizens,”¹ and Jews became more patriotic toward their respective secure homelands.

This movement towards further inclusion in society can be seen through the development of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Founded in 1860 in Paris, this society aims to protect and improve the lives of Jews, especially in states where emancipation had stalled at the time. From Article I of its statutes, the society aims to “work everywhere for the emancipation and moral progress of the Jews.” In order to achieve this, the society spread French education and culture and secured the help of friendly governments on their behalf. For example, in 1867 France, Italy, Belgium and Holland refused to renew treaties with Switzerland unless absolute civil and political equality was granted to the Jews, under guidance of the Alliance. In this way, the society was spreading the belief that Jews could live in their respective countries unoppressed, and as much as possible instituted this emancipation throughout Europe and North Africa.

Although these growing freedoms in secular European systems meant that Jews distanced themselves from Judaism and other Jewish communities, there existed a “tension between the personal life of a Jew and the public life amongst secular society.”² This tension existed despite positive integration, and paved the way for Zionism – in the context of growing anti-Semitic pressures in Europe. Integral to the Jewish value system is the bond between the people and the Land of Israel, manifested in the dream of the “End of Days” when a leader will emerge to gather Jews in the world, guide them to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. In this way, Jews from all over the world should embrace a collective consciousness and emigrate to Israel.

¹ Maor, Moshe. "Israel Studies an Anthology: The History of Zionism." *Jewish Virtual Library*. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, May 2009. Web.

² Maor, Moshe. "Israel Studies an Anthology: The History of Zionism." *Jewish Virtual Library*. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, May 2009. Web.

Following the French Revolution, however, this dream was instead set aside in favor of the happiness of inclusion.

A History of Anti-Semitism in France

For the purpose of this paper, I will now investigate the French case more closely. The happiness of inclusion in France was tempered by many waves of anti-Semitism, which challenged the French Jewry's trust in French Republicanism and increased support for Zionism.

Firstly, the Dreyfus Affair in 1894 made it clear that a supposedly secular Third Republic did not protect its well-integrated Jewish citizens. Alfred Dreyfus, a French artillery officer of Jewish descent, was sentenced to life imprisonment for communicating military secrets. Dreyfus, however, was not the culprit and the military suppressed evidence that would have acquitted him, instead accusing him of additional charges. In 1906, Dreyfus was exonerated, uncovering blatant institutional anti-Semitism from high-ranking officials. Secondly, about 76,000 Jews were deported from France to death camps during the German occupation of World War II, under the collaborating Vichy regime. This betrayal by the regime was "far more lethal... [leading to an] ambiguous relationship between France and its Jews."³ Thirdly, after the Fourth Republic reinstated French Jews' civil rights, France became a strong advocate of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), taking a strong political stance against Israel and inciting anti-Semitic acts in France. In 1980, an anti-Israel terrorist attack struck the Copernic Synagogue in Paris; Prime Minister Raymond Barre responded by saying, "this odious bombing was meant to strike Jews who were going to the synagogue, but instead it hit innocent French people,"

³ Navon, Emmanuel. "France, Israel, and the Jews: The End of an Era?" *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 9.2 (2015): 201-11. Web.

excluding Jews from the community of ‘innocent French.’ This kind of rhetoric naturally wounded French Jews.

The most recent wave of anti-Semitism in France has occurred with the rise of ISIS, perpetuated by the economic and social struggles of French Muslim populations in the banlieues. A failure to integrate Muslim immigrants has contributed to their increased recruitment for radical Islamic projects. Today, 475,000 Jews represent less than 1% of the country’s population but, according to the French Interior Ministry, 51% of all racist attacks are against Jews.⁴ In fact, there were 851 recorded anti-Semitic incidents in France in 2014, more than doubling 2013’s total.⁵ This clash between radical Muslims and Jews is not only politically motivated, as suggested by France’s support of the PLO in the late twentieth century and its current strong stance against ISIS, but also by a different experience of integration in France, stemming from colonial integration. North African Jewish immigrants to France received immediate aid from Jewish welfare organizations; on the other hand, Muslim immigrants from North Africa were left to struggle independently, and came to resent the better resources to which Jews had access. Moreover, the Muslim immigrant’s civil status felt more tentative; Algerian Jews were granted citizenship in 1870, whereas Algerian Muslims were granted this status in 1947. Finally, North African Jews were already in the middle class and accustomed to French culture, having received education from the Alliance Israélite Universelle. This afforded them much more upward social mobility.⁶ As a partial result, today, unemployment in the banlieues reaches a shocking 40% and

⁴ Goldberg, Jeffrey. "Is It Time for the Jews to Leave Europe?" *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, Apr. 2015. Web. 07 June 2016.

⁵ Brenner, Marie. "The Troubling Question In The French Jewish Community: Is It Time To Leave?" *Vanity Fair*. N.p., Aug. 2015. Web.

⁶ Mandel, Maud S. "Muslims and Jews in France." *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 20.6 (2015): n. pag. Web.

schools are in crisis⁷. Hence, both political and local integration differences predisposed these populations to clash.

Many violent events have marked the public consciousness and highlighted this clash. The perpetrators of these attacks were raised as secular Muslims where poverty and racism limited their growth potential. The failure of integration pushed them toward terrorist movements carrying out anti-Semitic acts. In 2012, Mohamed Merah, an Al Qaeda follower, killed three children and a rabbi at a Jewish school in Toulouse. In January 2014, a “Day of Rage” march critiquing President Francois Hollande brought together far-rightists but also Muslims, united by a hatred of Jews. At this march, the slogan “Jew, France is not for you” was chanted and violence broke out between protesters and the authorities.⁸ More recently, Amedy Coulibaly, a French-born Muslim who had pledged allegiance to ISIS, murdered four Jewish shoppers in a kosher supermarket in Paris. The increasing number of these homegrown, highly public anti-Semitic jihadist attacks has instilled a growing sense of fear in the French Jewish population.

Anti-Semitic waves of violence and betrayal have alienated French Jews time and time again, forcing the questioning of the French Republic’s capacity to protect them. French Jews, in this way, have developed a Zionist penchant and in the context of today’s violence, thousands are considering and even pursuing Aliyah.

Law of Return: Growing Number of Jews Emigrate to Israel

As discussed previously, the premise of a Zionist ideology is a communal existence implemented in Eretz Israel, in which the identity of the Jewish people had original formed.

⁷ Leff, Lisa. "How to Be a Jew in France: Leon Blum and French Anti-Semitism." *Foreign Affairs* 94 (2015): 232. Print.

⁸ Goldberg, Jeffrey. "Is It Time for the Jews to Leave Europe?" *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, Apr. 2015. Web. 07 June 2016.

Along these lines, modern Israel has laws which allow Jews from all over the world to emigrate to Israel. Israel's Declaration of Independence proclaims:

“The State of Israel will be open to Jewish immigration and to the ingathering of the exiles... We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to unite around Israel and to immigrate to the homeland.”

In practice, this is instituted through the Law of Return, that “makes every Jew in the world a potential citizen of Israel.”⁹ Since its enactment in 1950, this law allows applicants who meet the criteria to acquire full citizenship and a slew of other benefits including tax, housing and educational benefits. The law applies to any Jew who was born to a Jewish mother, converted to Judaism and who has not joined another religion.¹⁰

As a result of both growing anxiety on the European continent and the institutionalized insistence of Israel to welcome ‘exiled’ Jews from all over the world, there have been major demographic shifts, especially in Europe. During 2014, Israel welcomed 27,993 new immigrants with most immigrants arriving in Israel from the Ukraine (6,996), France (6,377), Russia (5,040), and the United States (3,208). In 2015, emigration to Israel from France is expected to be closer to 9,000. These figures mark a dramatic increase in Aliyah from France, and a growing desire from French Jews to consider a ‘return’. In 2014, 13,000 people representing 30,000 household members attended Jewish Agency Aliyah fairs and sessions in France.¹¹

⁹ Navon, Emmanuel. "France, Israel, and the Jews: The End of an Era?" *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 9.2 (2015): 201-11. Web.

¹⁰ Kooy, Renae. *Survey of World Jewish Demographics*. Rep. Lausanne: Jerusalem International Conference, 2015. Print.

¹¹ *The Urgent and The Important: Performance Report*. Rep. N.p.: Jewish Agency for Israel, 2015. Print.

The French Director of the Jewish Agency for Israel claims that most French Jew emigrants come from middle- and upper-class areas with little direct contact with anti-Semitism, whereas only 15% are from poor areas with large Muslim populations. This difference can be attributed to the generous social welfare benefits the poor are afforded in France, which Israel cannot match.¹² So, why are wealthier Jews emigrating to Israel? French Jews emigrating to Israel are spurred by a history of anti-Semitism in France, fear regarding the growing threat of radical Islamists, uncertainty regarding France's economic future and an inability to live comfortably in France anymore. This inability manifests itself in many ways. For example, Jewish parents feel that they must put their children in Jewish or Catholic schools, fearing backlash in public schools filled with Muslim students. After the Charlie Hebdo attacks, some public school classes were disrupted when Muslim students did not participate in memorial activities. Fear of the public school system is real: 40% of Jewish students are in Jewish schools, and 35% are in Catholic schools.¹³ Moreover, French Jews feel like they need to hide that they are Jewish, not only in the streets but also at home. There have been reports that apartment complex residents have asked Jewish residents to remove their mezuzah, a piece of parchment with Torah verses, from their front door. As such, these numbers are only expected to increase.

Governments Using Mourning as a Political Strategy

As a result of this intense anti-Semitism, many have drawn comparisons between the pre-war 1930s and today for Jews in Europe, including Benjamin Netanyahu who calls for mass exodus. However, this comparison ignores key differences. Firstly, the state's reaction to

¹² Liphshiz, Cnaan. "The Real Reason French Jews Are Leaving France in Record Numbers." *Forward*. N.p., 6 Jan. 2016. Web.

¹³ Brenner, Marie. "The Troubling Question In The French Jewish Community: Is It Time To Leave?" *Vanity Fair*. N.p., Aug. 2015. Web.

violence has been strong and swift, deploying thousands of armed troops to guard schools and synagogues. Secondly, anti-Semitic speech in France is monitored and prosecuted. Lastly, state leaders have made repeated public statements insisting that French Jews belong in France.¹⁴ Despite these differences, Israeli officials persist in calling French Jews to Israel.

Following the Charlie Hebdo and kosher supermarket attacks in Paris in 2015, ceremonies for the victims gave both Israeli and French politicians a platform to “claim the Jewish victims as their own.”¹⁵ These tactics, mourning the victims as appropriation, saw Israeli leaders encouraging European Jews to emigrate to Israel and French leaders declaring that this would undermine the French Republic. Each side expressed a distinct “vision of political community.” At the Grande Synagogue in Paris, all parties gathered in front of a large crowd. At this commemoration, Valls exclaimed that “France without Jews is not France,” pleading to French Jews to remain in France and support the vision of the French Republic. In his view, the emancipation of the Jews is a founding principle, and comes in stark contrast to comments made by Raymond Barre discussed previously. At the same ceremony, appropriation continued with Netanyahu expressing, “I wish to tell to all French and European Jews-- Israel is your home.” The victims’ funerals took place in Israel although none were Israeli, challenging the notion that they belonged in France. At the funeral, Israeli political leaders reiterated the Zionist claim that Israel was their one homeland.

Israel’s policy encouraging Aliyah will cause tension in countries with large Jewish populations, like France. This is especially the case when the mass departure of Jews from France would signal the failure of the French Republican dream. Using recent violence as

¹⁴ Leff, Lisa. "How to Be a Jew in France: Leon Blum and French Anti-Semitism." *Foreign Affairs* 94 (2015): 232. Print.

¹⁵ Balkan, Osman. "Charlie Hebdo and the Politics of Mourning." *University of Pennsylvania* (2015): n. pag. Print.

ammunition and taking this rhetoric to the stage, Israel hopes to further increase the rate of Aliyah. However, it remains unclear if French Jews will respond to this call to action in more significant numbers, or even whether the current figures are representative of the general sentiment across French Jews.

French Jews' Attachment to Both Zionism and the French Republic

Growing anti-Semitism in France has made many French Jews great supporters of Zionist ideals. However, although French Jews support the establishment of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, it is unclear whether French Jews want to be a part of it. Zionism, in this way, does not entail a desire to emigrate to Israel even in the face of increased violence. The reactions of community leaders and the general public, however, makes it clear that Aliyah is not the norm's reaction.

Netanyahu's speech at the Grande Synagogue after the Charlie Hebdo attacks received mixed reactions. His entrance was welcomed with a loud applause, a standing ovation and chants of "Israel will live, Israel will win." These reactions, once again, demonstrate French Jews' commitment to Zionism. However, when Netanyahu expressed that French Jews should emigrate to Israel, the crowd reacted by singing the national anthem, La Marseillaise. In this way, "France's Jews would stand with Netanyahu against the scourge of anti-Semitism but would not accept the suggestion...that Jews did not fully belong in France."¹⁶ This is significant: despite being strong supporters of Zionism, French Jews still believe and support the ideals of the French Republic, feel connected to French culture, and are determined to improve France.

¹⁶ Leff, Lisa. "How to Be a Jew in France: Leon Blum and French Anti-Semitism." *Foreign Affairs* 94 (2015): 232. Print.

Community leaders in France have also expressed the same sentiment following a bloody 2015 in France. For example, Yonathan Arli, Vice President of CRIF – an umbrella group of Jewish institutions in France, believes French Jews should stay in France; “we went through bombing attacks, the Holocaust, acts of terrorism, and we are not about to leave now.” These leaders not only express disenchantment regarding emigration as a solution, but also discontent regarding the Israeli reaction. Rabbi Menachem Margolin, director of the European Jewish Association, said that the preservation and protection of Jewish life in all their homelands across Europe is far better than emigration, expressing disappointment with an Israeli government that responds to violence by issuing statements about the importance of Aliyah instead of employing every means possible to strengthen the safety of Jewish life in Europe.¹⁷ Finally, and most importantly, there is a communal feeling of defiance. Laurent-David Samama, writing in *The Forward* publication, says:

"Others-including young Jews like me-feel that making Aliyah is a too-easy escape; it's simply not the answer. Those of us who remain in Paris, Marseille or Lyon are determined not to let the terrorists win. Throughout French history, Jews have experienced many periods of crisis. We've always overcome them, and we will overcome them again. Now more than ever-there is another communal faction that believes France needs us to stay here, to play the role of social whistleblower."¹⁸

¹⁷ Brownfeld, Allan. "Netanyahu's Calls for Jews to Flee Europe Are Rebuffed as "Posthumous Victory" for Hitler." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 34.3 (2015): 48-49. Print.

¹⁸ Samama, Laurent-David. "French Jews, Escaping to Israel Is Not the Answer." *The Forward*. N.p., 8 Sept. 2014. Web.

French Jews are defiantly rallying around the values of the French Republic, and as such, declaring their dual allegiance to both France and Zionism. This is not a contradiction. As Prime Minister from 1936 to 1937 and president of the French Zionist Union, Léon Blum also showcased this dual allegiance. Hence, French Jews are doing the opposite of taking Netanyahu's advice by doubling down on their Zionism and belief in the French Republic. In this way, they are denying Hitler what Claude Lanzmann called "a posthumous victory," by not leaving the European continent.¹⁹ At the same time, there is also an understanding that this 'new' anti-Semitism, led by radical Islam, is a global phenomenon – French Jews would not be safer in Israel than in Europe. Israel is also at the center of a complex Middle Eastern conflict, under threat of terrorist attacks and perhaps the rise of a new Intifada. Thus, Aliyah is not a perfect solution.

Challenges for the French Republic

Although French Jews are exhibiting defiance in the face of growing anti-Semitism, it is undeniable that emigration figures are increasing at a fast pace. Using an expression from the Algerian civil war, a large majority of French Jews are ignoring the choice between "the coffin or the suitcase," and choosing instead to pursue social justice and improve France. Today, Jewish lives are endangered as a result of the spread of radical Islam in France, and the French government and people must take action beyond expressing a desire to keep French Jews in France. The Republic faces an uphill climb, plagued with integration issues, economic stagnation and cultural dilution. Substantive and sustainable steps must be taken to protect French Jews beyond more soldiers on the street. There is a need to stop blaming Israel's policies for anti-

¹⁹ Brownfeld, Allan. "Netanyahu's Calls for Jews to Flee Europe Are Rebuffed as "Posthumous Victory" for Hitler." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 34.3 (2015): 48-49. Print.

Semitic violence, and instead confront the potential incompatibility of Islam with the secular ideals of the Republic and the economic inequality experienced by its Muslim population. It is indeed an uphill climb – the entire French collective will need to unite to defend the Republic and what it stands for.