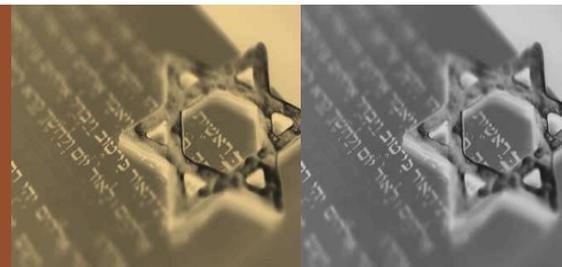


CHAPTER ELEVEN:

COMMUNITY NUMBER FOUR

THE JEWS OF FRANCE



The Jewish community of France, the second largest Diaspora community in the world, is in many ways unique among the Jewish communities of the world. It is, on the one hand, one of the oldest of the western communities with roots in the Roman empire. On the other hand, the majority of its members are new, belonging to families who arrived in France in the last couple of generations. It is, on the one hand, the earliest community in the world to be fully emancipated, freed from restrictive laws after many centuries of limitations and discrimination. On the other hand, it is a community that still conspicuously suffers from anti-Semitism, and which lives in constant apprehension, conscious of its vulnerability. On the one hand, its roots are tied up with the earliest Ashkenazic community history. On the other hand, most of its members, and increasingly, the dominant part of its leadership, originate in North Africa. Thus it is a community of surprises and many contradictions. Welcome to France!

1. Who are the Jews in the national community? Where did they come from? How many are there? What is their geographical distribution inside the country?

The origins of the French Jewish community are back in the period of the Roman Empire. We know of a Jewish presence in the first centuries of the Common Era but the first major period of the community was when it developed as the western branch of the Ashkenazi community of the German lands before the turn of the first millenium. As part of that community it suffered the ups and downs of all the Jewish communities in Western Europe. It suffered occasional destruction and exile and was subject to the various anti-Semitic charges of the local Church and population. A long-term expulsion occurred at the end of the fourteenth century and there were no Jews in France officially for several centuries. The first group that returned, albeit initially in the guise of Christians, were Conversos (Marranos) who arrived in the sixteenth century. Slowly, in the seventeenth century, many of these families openly professed Judaism with the quiet acquiescence of the authorities. When France acquired the eastern territory of Alsace and Lorraine in the seventeenth century, it acquired too, a large Ashkenazi Jewish population. These two populations became the basis for the modern Jewish community.

The next major intake into the community took place in the early twentieth century. The years before and after World War One saw an influx of thousands of Jews both from Eastern Europe and from the Sephardi lands of the Ottoman Empire (before W.W.1.) or Turkey, North Africa and Greece.



The holocaust devastated the community that numbered some 300,000 on the eve of World War Two. Around a quarter of the community was murdered by the Nazis with the active complicity of the Vichy government (the complicit French regime headed by Marshal Petain).

In the years immediately after the war there was a flow of Ashkenazi immigrants from Eastern Europe into the country, and the addition of tens of thousands of Jews augmented considerably the depleted population. However, the main post war influx occurred from the mid-1950's as enormous numbers of French speaking Jews from the areas of North Africa where France had until recently been the dominant imperial power, entered France, seeking an environment where they could feel at home. As the climate in Arab countries became less and less hospitable with the rise of the Arab Israeli conflict and the development of Arab nationalism, the numbers continued to swell and more than two hundred thousand immigrants, Sephardi or Mizrachi Jews mainly from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, eventually became part of French Jewry. At this point in time they form the majority of the community.

In geographical terms, of the probably just over 500,000 Jews currently in France, at least half live in and around Paris. The second largest community is in the southern French town of Marseille – about 70,000. Lyon, Toulouse, Nice and Strasbourg all have communities of between fifteen and twenty five thousand. In addition there are hundreds of smaller communities.

2. How can they be defined economically? What are their professions and occupations?

Many of the North African immigrants arrived with traditional artisan skills that had been in their families for generations but under the impact of the modern western economy of France, they tended to abandon these skills by the second generation and to adapt to the modern economy. Many abandoned artisan professions but used their skills in industry. The professional schools run by the ORT organization enabled many to make a comfortable transition to the new economy. The occupational spread of French Jewry today includes a concentration of workers in the white collar professions and the business world. A recent survey showed some 21% of French Jews engaged in the free professions or management, some 47% in clerical professions of one kind or another, 16% in trade, 6% as craftsmen and artisans, and 10% in industry and services. On the whole, like many other western communities, the French community is a largely middle class entity, with at least 60% belonging to this group.

3. What is the religious orientation of the Jewish community?

The background of the modern French community is traditional and orthodox. Prior to the North African immigrations of the 50's and 60's orthodoxy was much weaker although institutionally, French synagogues were all officially orthodox. That was a result of the organization of French Jewry within a tightly controlled French governmental structure that did not allow for individual religious expression, seen as



deviancy. As opposed to many of the earlier Jews, most of the immigrants who came from North Africa in the fifties and sixties were strongly connected to their traditional religious outlook. As a result there is a very strong orthodox presence in French Jewry of a modern open cast. In addition, however, the last decade or so has seen a strong movement towards the Haredi world and about 7% of the Jewish population define themselves at present in this category. Reform and liberal congregations account for some 5% of the population and around ten years ago, the first Conservative congregation was set up. However, it should be noted that all of these groups account for only a little more than 50% of the community. That is to say that almost half of the community is not affiliated religiously.

4. What Jewish educational and cultural life is there in the community?

There are many Jewish schools in France. In the last official survey of the community in 1996, the number was more than a hundred. In Paris alone there are more than twenty elementary or high schools and most of the medium or largish communities have their own schools. However, the majority of French Jews choose to send their children into the general system. This can be seen perhaps as an expression of the intense desire of Jews to be seen as part of the French nation in a country where traditionally over the last generations of the French republic, the government and society has shown little patience for ethnic or religious groups which emphasise their differences. Altogether the percentage of French Jewish children who go to some kind of day school stands currently at about 40%.

Youth movements and organisations have traditionally been strong in France. These have tended to run the whole range of ideologies from Zionist to Socialist. It is worth mentioning that there has traditionally been a strong left wing attraction to large sections of the younger generations. Many of the leaders of the student demonstrations of the late 1960's were extreme Jewish leftists. The community leaders were extremely concerned lest this lead to a backlash against the community. The U.E.J.F., the Union of French Jewish Students, is an extremely strong organisation with some 15,000 affiliated members, and is one of the most organised student bodies in France. Youth movements are still strong today with many thousands of members.

Many universities have faculties or courses of Jewish studies and many French high schools offer Hebrew as a choice of language, following a cultural agreement with the State of Israel. There are also specific Jewish frameworks of higher education including a Rabbinical Seminary training rabbis for French speaking countries that has been active since the nineteenth century.

The last years have seen a general flowering of Jewish institutions and organisations of all kinds. For example, the number of kosher restaurants and supermarkets around Paris has gone up dramatically in recent years.

There is a vibrant cultural life among French Jewry. There are regular Jewish cultural events and festivals with music and film brought from all over the world. Many Jews



are active in the cultural field and books and films with Jewish content are common and popular. Despite the fact that the strong Yiddish culture that characterised French Jewry in the post-war years has faded, Paris still has some active Yiddish culture and scholarship and boasts the largest Yiddish library in Europe. Jewish theatre and dance companies are active and Jews take a part *as Jews* in the intellectual and cultural life of the country. French art and literature especially have seen large numbers of Jews actively involved. Many have gained international reputations. There are several Jewish newspapers and journals including two weekly papers and many Jewish journalists are active in the French press, something that has been a target of attack in the extreme right wing and fascist circles of French society.

5. What is the situation of assimilation and intermarriage in the community?

In the last twenty years there has been a revival of a stronger Jewish identity among French Jews. Spearheading this revival have been many of the children of the North African Jews. In general the North African Jews stood for a prouder, louder type of Judaism, one that was not afraid to stand up and be counted. This was in grave contrast to the earlier generations of French Jews who had internalised the French reticence for emphasising separate group identities. A major turning-point came at the beginning of the 1980's when the newer group began gaining control of many of the institutions of French Jewish life. The Chief Rabbi of France, for example was chosen for the first time from the Sepharadi/Mizrachi community in the summer of 1980. Since then the post has remained in the hands of this part of the community. This then is one of the sides of the French community.

However, at the same time there is a strong trend towards a loss of Jewish identity in parts of the community. In parallel with other parts of the Jewish world, the traditional Jewish family, bastion of the community in previous generations, is under attack, and alternative models of family are becoming more and more common. As far as intermarriage is concerned, we see a pattern that has developed in many western countries. Intermarriage is increasingly accepted by young Jews and has become very prevalent. A recent survey calculated that about 40% of all French Jewish marriages in the last few years had included a non-Jewish partner.

6. Are there any major historical circumstances that affected the inflow or outflow of Jews to and from the community?

If we restrict ourselves here to recent generations the answer is clearly yes. We have already mentioned the fact that the Holocaust caused the deaths of many tens of thousands of French Jews. In the post Holocaust years tens of thousands of refugees from Central and Eastern Europe sought to start a new life for themselves in France and as mentioned the influx of Jews from North Africa was caused basically by the collapse of French rule there and the desire of much of the population to rebuild their lives in the framework of a culture that had proved hospitable and attractive to them. In addition the rise of Arab nationalism and the Arab Israel conflict were extra incentives for many of those who came. In general it can be said



that the majority of the current French community can trace their presence in France to the effect of some historical trauma which had affected the Jewish world in the last two generations. This is really astonishing for a community whose history goes back for two thousand years.

7. Are there welfare problems within the Jewish community? Are there welfare organisations within the community?

As far as welfare problems are concerned, French Jewry has its share. Many among the new immigrant groups from the fifties and sixties arrived with very little in material terms, and there have been large pockets of poverty within the community as a result. In the mid-90's around 12% of French Jewry were below the poverty line. Today, around 25,000 Jews are registered with welfare services. In addition it should be noted that there are Aids and drug problems among the younger elements of the community.

The major official agency that works in the field of social welfare inside the Jewish community is the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (F.S.J.U.) – the Unified Jewish Social Fund, created in 1950 with the help of the Joint to help French Jewry recover from its wartime devastation. Although its field of activity is far wider than welfare a considerable proportion of its funds go for welfare.

8. What is the feeling of physical security of the Jewish community? Has there been and is there today a problem of anti-Semitism?

There is a strange duality in the modern Jewish story in France. On the one hand, France was the first European country to grant equality to its Jews and to make them into citizens. This occurred at the time of the French Revolution in the early 1790's. One of the major effects of this emancipation was to create a feeling of enormous gratitude among all sections of French Jewry which expressed itself in the development of an intense patriotism and loyalty towards what was now seen by many as the new "motherland".

However, throughout the nineteenth century we see that the official equal status granted by law was not always translated into social acceptance. Beneath the surface there was often tension between the French Jews and their fellow Frenchmen. The 1840 Damascus blood libel accusation whipped up popular opinion in France against the Jews and saw violent attacks on the Jewish community of Alsace. The latent anti-Jewish feeling of parts of the French population came to a head in the last decades of the nineteenth century when we get the beginning of large anti-Semitic parties which whipped up much public opinion against the Jews.

The infamous Dreyfus case of the 1890's showed many Jews that even after a century of full emancipation they were still considered potential traitors to the country with which they had thrown in their lot so enthusiastically. This feeling increased, of course, under the Vichy government of Marshal Petain between 1940 and 1944. This regime was responsible for considerable anti-Jewish legislation and



cooperated actively with the Nazi regime in the deportation policy. France's acquiescence in the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazis is still a subject of great discussion in France as a whole and among French Jews specifically. Despite the official apology of President Chirac in 1995, there is a feeling within large parts of the Jewish community that France has not completely got over its prejudices towards the Jews as an alien group.

There have been a number of factors that have fed this opinion among many Jews. Over the last twenty years or so there have been many cases of anti-Semitic incidents in France. Desecrations of graveyards and attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions have been widespread and there is a persistent feeling that not enough has been done by the authorities to apprehend the perpetrators of these acts. This period has seen the rise of a not insignificant extreme right wing developing in the political arena. The principal figure here is Jean Marie le Pen who appears to have deep support for his anti-alien policies in the French population. Jews watch and are fearful.

An extra source of concern has been the developing anti-Israel feeling in the government and more recently in the country. Up to the Six Day War in 1967, France was one of Israel's strongest supporters but the embargo declared by De Gaulle on the sale of French arms to Israel on the eve of the war signalled a change of direction that continues to concern much of French Jewry. There is a perception that the government is consistently pro-Arab in its policies towards the Middle East and weak in its support for Israel.

The Al Aksa intifada that broke out in 2000 has made this perception far stronger. The government is perceived to have taken a pro-Palestinian line and to have shown insufficient understanding of the situation of the State of Israel. Pronouncements from government circles have been strident in their criticism of Israel and this very much reflects the media line that has dominated the coverage of the intifada by the French press and has contributed towards a strong anti-Israel atmosphere in French public opinion. The Jewish community has also found itself at the receiving end of a host of abuse from the Arabic French community (about six million strong including illegal workers) and an unprecedented spate of violence, both verbal and physical, has broken out against the Jews of France since the beginning of the intifada. Some six hundred cases of violence against French Jews were recorded by the beginning of 2002. Once again, there is a feeling that the government is not doing very much to deal with the incitement and the violence.

9. What are the major problems on the agenda of the Jewish community?

On the one hand the agenda is like that of any modern western country. Assimilation and intermarriage, as noted, represent a problem and perhaps this should be seen as a part of the larger process of westernisation (read Americanisation) of French life. But there are specific problems that are to be found in the French community. These have already been alluded to. There is a feeling of



physical insecurity that has manifested itself strongly in the period since the outbreak of the Al Aqsa intifada.

This physical insecurity is made worse by an increasing feeling that the government and the media are espousing an extreme anti-Israel line in their Middle East coverage and policy. A feeling of vulnerability among many French Jews seems increasingly apparent. It appears that many are feeling torn between their homeland of France and their other homeland of Israel. It should be noted in this context that since the 1967 Six Day War, support for Israel and pride in its achievements have been an important component of the Jewish identity of the majority of French Jews. Many now find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place, in terms of their divided identity, based on a perception that France is perhaps a less hospitable place than had previously been perceived.

Another set of internal questions relates to the divisions and tensions that exist within the community. There are tensions between the different groups of French Orthodoxy, with the ultra-Orthodox groups looking increasingly outside of France and away from the French Chief Rabbinate for its sources of authority. There are also tensions between the traditional leadership of French Jewry, exemplified by the aristocratic families of the community such as the Rothschilds and the newer more militant leadership of the community, largely associated with the North African group, which tends to find the traditional leaders too moderate and accommodating in their approach. It remains to be seen how these tensions will work themselves out but they definitely represent question marks in a community that as a whole increasingly perceives itself to be under siege.

10. What are the demographic trends within the community? Can anything be said about the future of the community?

There have been increasing calls for Aliyah among sections of the French community since the beginning of the intifada. French Jewry has long had a strong relationship with Israel and one of the expressions of this relationship has been considerable numbers of Olim. Well over 40,000 Jews have come on Aliyah since 1948 and recent years have seen a strong stream especially, although not exclusively among religious Jews. It is certainly possible, if the current difficulties of the community persist, that numbers of Olim will increase greatly in the years to come.

At the same time, the more usual attrition in the community because of assimilation and intermarriage will almost certainly continue to take their toll. The French Jewish community is subject to a declining birth rate, especially significant because there was a norm of large families among many of the North African Jews. On the other hand, the trend to greater religiosity among parts of the community might do something to partially offset this trend. As mentioned, there has been a strong cultural and traditional revival among large sections of the community in recent years and this trend, if continued, will be likely to have an effect.



It might be said, in conclusion, that the community as a whole is going through difficult circumstances and these can have different outcomes. Perceived attacks on communities often bring a new cohesiveness, and a new flowering of culture and identity among the more alienated and assimilated sub-groups. It remains to be seen what happens in this respect to the Jewish community of France.

11. What is the general contribution of the community to France as a whole?

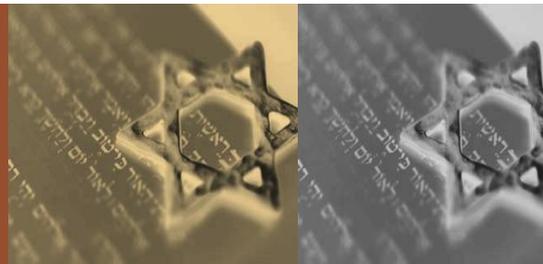
French Jews have been involved in most aspects of French life in the more than two centuries following emancipation. To a large extent they have been involved more as individuals than as members of a community. Collectively, they have been especially active in the middle class and the professions. Many are involved in public service and have reached high positions of public office. In intellectual and cultural life, especially, French Jews have throughout the 20th century consistently played an important role. It is sufficient to mention the contribution of Pissaro, Soutine, Chagall and Modigliani, all of whom became world famous artists, praised the world over among enthusiasts of modern art from the time of the Impressionists. Writers such as Marcel Proust and Andres Maurois, and scholars such as the sociologist Emile Durkheim, the philosophers Henri Bergson and Emanuel Levinas, the literary critic Jacques Derrida and the anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, are household names in the international community of intellectuals.

12. What is the relationship with Israel in the community as a whole?

Despite some important French Zionists, including Herzl's chief lieutenant, Max Nordau (born in Budapest but resident in France from 1880), French Jewry as a whole was a minor contributor to Zionism. Perhaps the fact that it was the oldest emancipated Jewry in Europe led it to see France as its homeland in a stronger way than some other national Jewish communities. The Holocaust and the attitude of the French collaborationist Vichy government caused many Jews to think again and in the post war period, we begin to see larger numbers of Jews who consider leaving for Palestine and the Jewish state. Since 1948, more than 40,000 Jews from France have left for Israel. The presence of the more traditional minded North African Jews, many of whom had family ties with Jews in Israel did much to strengthen the ties between the Jews of France and Israel. Recently, in the wake of the new anti-Semitic wave of incidents that has occurred in France, the interest in Aliyah on the part of French Jews has strengthened considerably and they are now the source of one of the large groups of Olim currently coming to Israel. In the year 2003, for example, some 1,800 Jews came on Aliyah. In addition, a little under 70% of French Jews are estimated to have visited Israel.



Introducing French Jewish voices.



Sarah was born in Tunis and came with her family to France in the mid 1950's when she was fifteen years old. Her father was a jeweler in Tunisia and continued his profession in Marseilles.

"I still miss Tunis. It's taken me five years – till now really – to stop missing it so much. It's not surprising. I felt great affection for the place and the people. Before it got too difficult for us there, we had a lot of friends among our Arab neighbors. We went to some of their celebrations and they came to ours. They say that the sights and sounds of your childhood stay with you for ever. Well, I remember the sights and the sounds but most of all I remember the smells, the smells of the flowers and the spices in the market and the houses. France was not easy for me at first. I knew the language from my home in Tunis, but despite the fact that Marseilles was a port, and in that way had something in common with my hometown, I felt that I was living in a foreign land. Only slowly as the town in general and our neighborhood in particular filled up with other North African Jews, I started to relax, and from then on it became easier. School was totally different from what I'd experienced previously, despite the fact that we had felt the French influence all through our lives in Tunis. Marseilles was close to Africa and had absorbed some influences but nevertheless it was France and France was Europe! The Jews who were here before us are so different to us. They are Ashkenazi Jews, some of whom have lived in France for centuries. They look down on us. Then there are the immigrants from Eastern Europe who came after the war. They are almost as new as we are. Actually we have an advantage over them because we knew the language when we came and they had to learn everything from the beginning. We have little in common with the European Jews and sometimes it feels as though we belong to a totally different tribe! But slowly we're getting used to each other. I guess it's just a matter of realizing that we're all in the same boat and that despite our differences, we share many problems. We are learning to cooperate and now, I guess, we are beginning to see each other as rather distant parts of the same family. Let's see how things develop here. What is clear, I think, is that we are here in France to stay. It feels like it will be our new home for ever. I can't imagine moving anywhere else. We have some family who went to Israel at the same time as we moved here. They are having such a very hard time there. I'm sorry for them but I'm not surprised. For anyone who grew up where we grew up, it must be easier to put down roots here. We know the language, we know some of the culture. It must be easier here to feel that you're in control of your lives and for any immigrant, that's the main thing, to feel that you're in control. After five years here, I'm beginning to feel that I'm getting there. I wonder if the family in Israel will ever feel the same."



Frederick is Sarah's nephew. He studies in Paris.

"I just got a letter from the cousins in Dimona – that's a small town in the south of Israel. Anyway, they just read an article about us here that quoted a statement made by one of the community leaders saying that French Jewry might have to consider packing up and moving to Israel if the situation didn't improve. It was a bit over the top when he said it, but it's still being quoted and they just saw it. So what are they saying? That we should come to them there! Of course we won't. That would be like hitting the panic button when nothing much has happened. But I have to say that I don't laugh at their suggestion the way I used to when they invited us to come and live with them. For the last twenty years they've been making that suggestion about once every two or three years. I confess – I used to mock them. After all, have you seen Dimona? And after living in Paris??? This is the most beautiful city in the world and who in the world would ever think of leaving it? I grew up in Marseilles and since the first time I saw Paris, I knew that I wanted to live here. No, I can't imagine leaving here – especially not for Dimona! But I must confess that I've been feeling a little uneasy lately.

We've had a few problems with some of the Arab students up at the university, but actually, it's not only that. If I mention that I have relatives in Israel to any of my professors, I immediately get that kind of a knowing sneer. Israel? As if it's dirty. As if it deserves to be the pariah state that so much of the French media is trying to turn it into. Something has changed here. It's not the vandalism so much as the general climate that concerns me. There's something nasty beginning to surface here and while I think that the Chief Rabbi was totally over-reacting, I must confess that I don't like what I see that my France and my Paris are turning into. I must write them back, but I'm not sure what to say. I'm not the only one who feels this way. People all over the community are beginning to talk about the future. It's not just us Sephardim either. It's something that's running through the entire community. And nobody is quite sure what to do about the situation, other than to turn to the government and ask them for guarantees of our security. There are those who say that we simply need to wait this wave out: that things will turn back to what they were before. I hope they're right. But I guess it could get worse. If it does, we'll have a lot of thinking to do. I can't see us ever leaving but you can't be too sure. I wonder if the cousins in Israel ever feel the same."

