

France - 2003

Ah, Paris in the winter. What a lovely thought.

Yet mere mention of France these days in Jewish quarters evokes strong emotions and negative reactions. We are alarmed by the burning of synagogues and attacks on Jews over the last two years. Just this past spring, as a result of this widespread concern, I, as well as many other rabbis urged congregants to refrain from visiting France and from purchasing French goods. Little did I know that, it just so happens that the evening when I made this comment, 20 couples who had planned to go to France during the summer were at services, and decided right then and there to cancel their trip.

So, you can imagine what feelings I had as I joined about a dozen rabbis, members of the UJC (formerly the UJA) Rabbinic Cabinet for a trip to Paris two weeks ago.

We landed in Paris a little after 7 in the morning, and by 9 am, we were already in our first meeting, with Roger Cuckierman, the head of the CRIF, the umbrella organization of 60 French Jewish organizations, and which thus represents and speaks for French Jewry. He had just given a major annual public address the previous night on the state of French Jewry. The talk, which was widely reported in the French media, as well as the American Jewish newspapers dealt head on with the issue we wanted to learn about, and was attended by prominent government and business leaders.

France certainly has a problem, for its foreign policy is unquestionably pro-Arab. Israel is portrayed in the most negative of images. Its diplomatic approach is not driven just by economics and oil. As one of the individuals we met with explained, France is still obsessed with guilt over its role as a colonial power, and views all of international politics through this prism.

Couple that with a left-leaning press, quick to criticize the Jewish state, and a relationship with its Jews which can be described as hypocritical at best, and one can see the seeds of the dilemma. Although France was the home of the Enlightenment, and emancipated its Jews, it was conditional. In the famous words of Napoleon, "to the Jews as individuals everything. To the Jews as a people, rien, nothing." Many of us recall the chilling words of Charles de Gaulle after Israel's victory in the Six Day War, "The Jewish people are an arrogant and dominating people." Yet despite this history, five prime ministers of France have been Jewish.

And one more piece of the equation – while France is home to the largest Jewish population in Europe, about 500 – 600,000 Jews, it is also home to Europe's largest Muslim population, outnumbering the Jews at least ten-fold, with estimates ranging from 6 – 10 million, most of whom are emigres from North Africa.

The annual dinner was attended by the French Prime Minister, as well as many other prominent French government and political officials and dignitaries from all parts of the French establishment. Cuckierman is an honest, charismatic, hard-hitting, pull no-

punches kind of guy. His speech is still making waves, for he spoke of a dangerous alliance between extremists on the left and the right who converge in their anti-globalist, anti American, anti semitic, anti Zionist positions. In many respects, the issues have all become meshed together, as Jews have become equated with Israelis, and America and Israel's identities have also become merged as indistinguishable.

He was most appreciative of our support, and our coming to France.

There were several things we heard from him and other French Jewish leaders which surprised us.

The first surprise was to learn that the French Jewish community does not want us to boycott France or French goods. They feel it would be counterproductive at this point, and would have an adverse affect on their efforts to portray the perpetrators of anti semitism as the outsiders, and would also hurt Jewish owned businesses, who would suffer as a result of the loss of business and tourism.

French Jews are well-organized, integrated into French life, active and extremely connected to Israel. The Jewish Agency helps to train teachers and educate students. The community has never been so united. They are beginning to send members of the French regional press to Israel. An alliance in the French Parliament in support of Israel has 100 members, second only to the French-Morocco coalition.

A visit to a French Jewish day school was most refreshing. How wonderful it was to meet and see young French Jews, proud of their heritage, in spite of all the anti semitism they confront on an almost daily basis. Several of the young people told us that it is dangerous for them to wear a hai, mezuzah, Magen David, or Kippah in public. Yet despite this, they were all fiercely proud to be Jewish and did not shy away from being active members of the Jewish community. The headmaster of the school, which has 330 students, told us that their enrollment already is filled, through the year 2009, and the demand is so high, they could take in another 1,500 kids immediately if they had the space to accommodate them. Some 28,000 children are enrolled in the Jewish day schools run by this group, Kol Yisrael Chaverim, a pluralistic approach, and there are 4 other sponsors of Jewish day schools, with about 150 Jewish day schools in France.

So what is the source of the problem? Undoubtedly, the French government allowed the situation to get out of hand. The Magreb, Moslems from North Africa, are fed a steady diet of hate in their mosques and on the most popular tv station, Al Jazeera. By all accounts, they are the main perpetrators of the hooliganism, violence, and vandalism against French Jews and Jewish institutions. On college campuses, a student leader told us, Ariel Sharon is not a politician or a person, but the devil, as is George W. Bush. He said he suspected that not even Adolph Hitler in his time evoked such animosity.

The positive news is that over the last 6 – 8 months, the new French government has begun to crack down on these criminals. The new minister of the Interior, Sarkozy is taking the threats very seriously. We met with one of his top aides, who went out of his

way to attempt to convey to us what the government is doing to prevent further deterioration of the situation and to protect Jews and Jewish institutions.

You may have heard about a resolution passed in the end of December, calling for a University boycott of Israeli scientists and researchers. Yet this resolution, which passed in a meeting attended by only 33 people resulted in a petition denouncing the resolution and calling for its repeal signed by 21,000. Here again, we were surprised to learn from a high ranking official in the Department of Education, that he was directly involved in negotiations to repeal this effort. He was pleased to tell us of the success he had just had earlier that day in watering down an anti Israel resolution from one of the campuses.

The message was clear – the French government has woken up and begun to take actions to counter the excesses of anti semitism, which had been allowed to run rampant.

We American Jews were proud of the massive rally we assembled in Washington, D. C. last year in support of Israel. On April 7 of 2002, 200,000 people rallied all across France against anti semitism, and in support of Israel. 130,000 in Paris alone attended, which is most unusual, for French Jews do not usually go out to demonstrate in the streets. There were rumors that Arabs would attack them, and yet this did not deter people from coming out in full force, with French flags, singing LeMarseille.

So, how to describe my reaction? In a word, “femesht”, at least at first. But then, as we had more encounters with French Jews, the picture became clearer, and it turned to hopeful.

We went there expecting to see a community reeling from anti semitism and anti Israel feelings. In many respects, that is what we found. People fear for their personal safety, yet, they also recognized and appreciated the fact that things in the last few months had improved considerably, and that the government was trying to protect them. Clearly, the response of French Jews, many of them, emigres from North African countries, was an increase in their level of activism and commitment to Israel and Judaism.

We found a French Jewish community proud of its heritage, not afraid to take courageous stands, going against the grain of so many, in support of Israel. One astounding figure which we heard several times is that, 150,000, approximately 25 % of French Jews visited Israel this past year. If we would not have heard the figure so many times, from so many different people, we might have thought it was a mistake. Just imagine if that many American Jews traveled to Israel! It would go a long way to curing some of the serious economic problems facing Israel today.

As the headmaster told us, the response could easily be assimilation, yet the school is flourishing because of the sense of pride the people feel in Israel and in being Jewish. In fact, this story is being replicated across Europe, where over the last two decades there has been a quiet renaissance of Jewish life among people rediscovering and reclaiming their Jewish past. It is evidenced in the flourishing of Jewish museums, social and intellectual groups, publications, and thriving kosher restaurants.

The one question which I regret I did not have the chance to ask, and which I still hope I will be able to raise is whether the French government recognizes how its anti Israel rhetoric and positions contributes to the atmosphere which fosters anti semitism, and allows it to appear respectable.

But here again, the message is a mixed one. We visited Ville D'Hiver, the cite where French Jews were rounded up and deported to Aushwitz. Yet at this same cite, in 1995, French President Jacques Chirac made a definitive statement admitting French guilt for their complicity in deporting Jewish citizens and for their cooperation during the German occupation.

So, while there is anti semitism in France, it is not necessarily an anti semitic country. And the message is – yes, you can go and visit France, and be sure to go to the Jewish quarter of Paris and to patronize the shops and restaurants there. And by the way, we should learn from our French brothers and sisters, and you should also visit Israel as well. Let's see which piece of advice you will follow.

The story that came to mind while I was in France is the famous story from the Talmud about the fish who were trying to elude the fishermen's net. The fox told the fish that surely they should come out of the water where they would be safer. The fish replied, if it is dangerous for us here, in the water, how much the more so, outside of the water. The analogy was made to life without torah. The *mashal*, analogy also applies to the situation of the Jews of France. Rather than abandon their Judaism, French Jews see it as the means to define who they are, and to confront the world around them. Judaism is seen not as a burden, but as what sustains and nourishes them.

May we be inspired by their example.