"Is There a Future for European Jews?"

By Emmanuel Navon

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When I moved to Israel as a college graduate, I didn't do so because of anti-Semitism. I moved to Israel because I wanted to live there. Anti-Semitism was not my concern, nor was it a major issue for most French and European Jews at the time.

Sure, I had heard anti-Semitic remarks in school as a child, and at work as a young adult. In school, kids would say "don't be a Jew" to someone who wouldn't share. When I interned at the French Treasury during College, I remember a colleague making a comment about her boss being Israeli (she meant "Jewish"). But it was prejudice, the same prejudice that was encountered by other minorities.

I moved to Israel because I wanted to. But today, Jews who leave France do so because they have to. France's Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, has said many times in the past year or so that it is a tragedy that so many French Jews are leaving their

country just because they feel unsafe. He's right: it is a tragedy. But it is also a fact.

How did this happen, and is there any future for Jews in France and in Europe?

Notice that I didn't say "Europe" but "France and Europe." This was deliberate. Not only because France has the largest Jewish community in Europe (about half a million) and the second largest Jewish Diaspora in the world after the United States. But also because the fate of European Jews has always been related to the fate of French Jews.

France is the first European country that emancipated its Jews by granting them citizenship.

Having declared that all men are equal, the French Revolution could hardly exclude the Jews from the principles of the Declaration of human rights.

And yet, there was a caveat from day one.

The Jews considered themselves, and were considered by others, a people. For the French revolutionaries, if the Jews wanted freedom and equality, they had to become part of the French nation. During a heated debate about the Jews at the French National Assembly in 1791, a representative named Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre famously exclaimed: "The Jews should be granted everything as citizens, but nothing as a people."

Napoléon-Bonaparte even convened a Sanhedrin, and demanded from France's rabbis to publicly declare that Jews were no longer a people but only a religion. From now on, Jews would be called "Frenchmen of Jewish faith."

Many Jews liked the idea and embraced it. One of them was named Alfred Dreyfus. He even joined the French army and became an officer. You couldn't get more French than that. But, apparently, even a French army officer of Jewish faith was still a Jew and a foreigner. Dreyfus was the victim of a plot that falsely accused him of spying for Germany. When Dreyfus was publicly humiliated after his sentence, people shouted "death to the Jews" on the streets of Paris.

This is what convinced another assimilated European Jew, Theodore Herzl, that the

emancipation of European Jews had been a sham in the first place, and therefore

that the Jews had to reclaim their peoplehood and their right to self-determination.

It is in Paris that Herzl wrote *The Jewish State*, the founding document of modern

Zionism. But is it also in Paris that intellectuals like Émile Zola had the courage to

say out loud that the Dreyfus trial had been a miscarriage of justice. And at the

end, the case was reopened, Dreyfus was acquitted, and justice was made. Dreyfus

was returned to the army, and he fought for his country during World War One.

So were French Jews safe now? Anti-Semitism was still alive and kicking, to be sure,

but Jews were doing well. Some of them even became prominent politicians in the

1930s.

The conservative Georges Mandel was appointed Minister of the Colonies, thus

becoming in charge of the vast French Colonial empire. The Socialist Léon Blum

even became Prime Minister in 1936. Three years after Hitler came to power in

Germany, the French government was headed by a Jew. Imagine. Wasn't this the

ultimate proof that, under the darkening skies of Europe, France was a safe haven for Jews?

Well, it was until it wasn't. In May 1940, German tanks cut through French lines and reached Paris within days. The French Government, of which Georges Mandel was a senior member, withdrew to the southern city of Bordeaux. The French army had been dealt a terrible blow, and the government was divided about what to do: ask for an armistice and preserve Paris and the rest of the country from destruction, or move to Algiers and continue the war from the Empire together with Britain?

Mandel called for resistance. At the end, Marshal Pétain was asked to form a new government, and France capitulated.

Both Georges Mandel and Léon Blum were arrested. Blum spent the war in jail and was freed by US soldiers. He briefly became Prime Minister again, was instrumental in obtaining France's vote in favor of the partition of Palestine at the UN in 1947, and a kibbutz was named after him in Israel (Kibbutz "Kfar Blum"). As for Mandel,

he was murdered by the "Milice," a pro-German French para-military force, during the German occupation.

Some Frenchmen fought the Germans; others collaborated with them. Some hid Jews; others delivered them. Some 76,000 Jews were deported from France to the death camps during the German occupation.

And yet, the France of "liberté, égalité, fraternité" had prevailed over the France of Vichy (with a little bit of outside help, of course), the same way that after the Dreyfus Affair, the France of Émile Zola had eventually prevailed over the France of the Catholic reaction. France had once again a Jewish Prime Minister in the mid-1950s (Pierre Mendès-France).

When Morocco and Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, many Moroccan and Tunisian Jews moved to France. When Algeria became independent in 1962, after a long and bloody war, most Algerian Jews (who had been French citizens since 1870) moved to France rather than to Israel or to Québec.

French Algerians, whether they were Christian or Jewish, didn't have many options. They literally ran for their lives, haunted by the graphic threat: "la valise ou le cercueil" (the suitcase of the coffin).

This massive immigration had a deep impact on French Jewry. Until then, most French Jews were Ashkenazi and secular. Within a few years, French Judaism became dominantly Sephardic and traditional. You can witness this transformation by attending a service in the synagogue of Neuilly, the Paris suburb where I lived for a few years before moving to Israel.

The synagogue was built in 1878. Its first rabbi was Simon Debré, whose grandson, Michel Debré, was appointed Prime Minister by Charles de Gaulle in 1958. The synagogue's rabbi during the 1930s, Robert Meyers, was deported to Auschwitz with his wife in 1943 and never came back. The fate of both rabbis is remindful of the tragic paradox of French Jewry: one rabbi had a grandson who became prime minister; another rabbi died in Auschwitz.

Both Simon Debré and Robert Meyers were Ashkenazi. So was the rest of the community. All of it. Today, the community is almost entirely Sephardic. Go there on a Friday night, and you'll see a packed synagogue and hear North African tunes. Even the synagogue's rabbi is Sephardic since 2009.

But once the service is over, you'll notice something else. Outside, on the street, the synagogue is surrounded by soldiers. Not policemen, soldiers. When I attended the synagogue 24 years ago, there was a police car outside. Now there are soldiers. And not only outside this synagogue. Every synagogue and Jewish school in France today is protected by the army.

Imagine if the US army had to protect your synagogue or your Jewish Federation. But that's the reality of French and European Jews today.

They live in countries that are as free and as wealthy as the United States, but they need the army's protection to go to synagogue and to go to school.

Why? Because for the past few years, Jews have been murdered for being Jewish in France and in Belgium. And the words "mort aux Juifs!" (death to the Jews) are heard again on the streets of Paris during anti-Israel demonstrations.

Ten years ago exactly, a 23-year-old French Jew, Ilan Halimi, was captured and tortured to death by an organization called the "Gang of Barbarians" and led by Youssouf Fofana. On March 12, 2012, Mohammed Merah murdered three children and an adult in Toulouse's Jewish school.

In 2013, Jews were gunned down by a Jihadist at Brussels' Jewish museum. In 2014, worshipers at the Abrabanel synagogue in Paris narrowly escaped a pogrom. In January 2015, Jews were murdered at the Hypercasher supermarket in Paris by an Islamic State terrorist.

That's when the French government decided to enroll the army to protect synagogues and Jewish schools. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls asked French Jews not to leave the country, and he promised he would do everything in his power to protect them. But it was too late.

And it was too late because those barbaric crimes revealed something deeper that has been brewing in France for decades. It's not only that you need to hide your kippah (Jewish skullcap) on the street, and that you need army protection for your Jewish school and for your synagogue. It's more than that. It's an atmosphere that has become toxic.

I haven't lived in France for over two decades, so I'm actually not the most qualified person to share with you what it is to be a French Jew today. But I still have family there and I visit every so often. I also read about what's going on, and probably the most eye-opening book I've read recently about the fate of French Jews is a novel published last summer by French author Éliette Abécassis. The book is called *Aliyah*, which is the Hebrew word for immigration to Israel.

It's an autobiographical novel. Éliette's family can track its presence in France back to the days of Rashi. Some members of the family survived the Nazi occupation thanks to French neighbors who hid them. One branch of the family was from Morocco. When Éliette's parents heard hostile comments from their Muslim

friends and neighbors in Morocco after Israel's independence and after the 1956

Arab-Israeli war, they decided to move out.

To where? To France, of course. They were French teachers in Morocco, and now

they would be French teachers in the very Ashkenazi city of Strasburg.

Éliette grew-up in a family of academics who were proud of their Jewish heritage

and of their French culture. Éliette's passion was French literature, and she became

a teacher like her parents. She got a job in what the French call a "problematic

suburb." But teaching French literature to a class of Muslim teenagers ended-up

being more challenging than what she thought.

One day, a student gets up during class and yells at her: "Hey, teacher, is it true that

you're a bloody Jew?"

As Éliette gathers her thoughts to figure out how to react, another student asks:

"So what if she's a Jew? If she's not a Zionist, that's OK. Because the Zionists are

killing our brothers in Palestine. But if you're not a Zionist, teacher, don't worry, your life won't be in danger."

What a relief. Still, things are getting out of control, and Éliette sends an SMS to the Principal. The Principal walks in which a huge world map and hangs it over the black board.

"Can anyone in this class show me where Israel is on the map?" the Principal asks. No one has a clue. "What difference does it make?" a student eventually says. "The Jews are everywhere. They rule over the world." It's hopeless, the Principal figures out. She walks out with her map.

Now, let's go back to *La princesse de Clèves*, the 17th century French novel we were talking about, Éliette says. "Hey, teacher!" she's hackled again by a student. "Don't you think that Charlie Hebdo deserved it?" (he's referring to the French journalists who were murdered in Paris in January 2015 by Islamists who wanted to revenge the caricatures of the Prophet Muhamad). "And why was that worse than what the Jews are doing in Palestine?"

The bell rings, which feels like a relief. Éliette gets to her car, but it's covered with spit. She gets in and starts crying. Someone knocks at the window. Oh, no: it's one of the students. "Teacher" he tells her trying to be nice "It's OK if you're Jewish and if we spat on your car. Don't cry. We actually like you."

Thankfully, Éliette has a boyfriend with whom she can share her misery.

Except that her boyfriend is not Jewish, and admits to her that his grandfather collaborated with the Germans during the war. Éliette can't take it anymore, and she starts thinking about something she never thought would have ever crossed her mind: making *Aliyah* (hence the title of the book).

One day, as she sits on the bank of the river Seine with her boyfriend, he makes her promise that they'll meet again at that very spot in ten years. But Éliette is in tears. "What's wrong?" He asks. "In ten years, I won't be in France" she answers. "Then France will no longer be France" he replies with the sentence that ends the book.

This, in a nutshell, is the tragedy of French and European Jews. They feel that they

can no longer live in a country they love.

And they feel that way because European governments fell asleep at the wheel

while Muslim anti-Semitism and radical Islam were spreading throughout Europe.

Some European leaders, such as French President François Hollande and his Prime

Minister Manuel Valls, have woken-up. They are bombing the Islamic state in Iraq

and have declared a state of emergency at home. "We are at war" President

Hollande declared after the terrorist attacks in Paris of November 2015.

But other European politicians are trying to appease their Muslim constituents.

Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallström, for example, has blamed the

November 2015 Paris attacks on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (for which she only

blames Israel, of course). Ilmar Reepalu, the Mayor of the Swedish city of Malmö,

declared in 2010: "We accept neither Zionism nor anti-Semitism." Over 20% of the

population of Malmö is Muslim, and most Jews have left the city.

Malmö is Sweden's second largest city, but Stockholm, the Swedish capital, also has a 20% Muslim population.

The percentage is higher still in Brussels, Belgium (25%), in Bradford, UK (32%), and in Marseilles, France (35%). These figures have an impact on certain European politicians. Bradford, for example, is the district whose former Member of Parliament George Galloway declared in 2014 that his constituency was an "Israeli free zone."

A survey conducted in 2014 by "Fondapol" (a French think tank) and by "Ifop" (a French polling company) revealed that anti-Semitic prejudice in France is the highest among Muslims.

To the question "Do you think Jews have too much power in the economy and in finance?" the question was "yes" among 24% of the general population, 32% among far-left voters, 50% among far-right voters, and 73% among Muslims.

To the question "Do you think Jews have too much control over the global media?" the answer was "yes" among 21% of the general population, 28% among far-left voters, 51% among far-right voters, and 70% among Muslims.

And, finally, to the question "Do you think there is a Zionist plot?" the answer was "yes" among 17% of the general population, 18% among far-left voters, 38% among far-right voters, and 58% among Muslims.

The 2015 Report on Anti-Semitism, published two weeks ago by the Israeli government, revealed a sharp increase in anti-Semitic attacks in Europe, especially in France and in Britain. And the truth must be said. It might not be politically correct, but it is factually correct: most of these attacks were and are committed by Muslims.

That is the case regarding the most violent attacks against Jews throughout Europe in 2015: the killing at the Hypercacher supermarket in Paris; the shooting at the Copenhagen Great Synagogue; the attacks against the Orthodox Jewish community

in Manchester; and most recently the stabbing of a Jewish school teacher in Marseilles.

According to the report I just mentioned, over half of France's Jews are considering immigration.

And yet, Jews are being blamed by some. Last month, after a Jewish teacher was stabbed in Marseilles by radical Muslims, the former president of "Doctors without Borders" Rony Brauman declared that wearing a kippah on the streets of France is a provocation because it is a sign of political support for the State of Israel. So, basically, what Brauman was saying is that the Jewish teacher who was stabbed by Muslims in Marseilles was asking for it.

In the summer of 2014, during the war between Israel and Hamas, there were violent anti-Israel demonstrations throughout France, and many French Jews started packing. Christian Barbier, the editor of the weekly news magazine *L'Express*, wrote an editorial accusing French Jews that were leaving for Israel of betrayal and of cowardice.

French Jews should stay in France, Barbier wrote, but they should also denounce Israel and its policies if they want to be tolerated.

So Jews must stay, but then again they shouldn't be surprised of being attacked by Muslims if they support Israel.

Two hundred years ago, France's Jews had to renounce their peoplehood in order to become citizens. Today, they must disclaim Israel if they want to deserve protection from Muslims. This is not what France's political leadership is saying, of course. But Christian Barbier is definitely expressing a feeling that is alive and kicking in French public opinion.

And to the deal offered by Barbier, more than half of France's Jews today are saying: "Thanks, but no thanks. We're out of here."

I mean, does Barbier really believe that Jewish kids would stop being harassed in public schools if they would walk around with a sign saying they disapprove of Netanyahu and his policies?

In many neighborhoods, sending a Jewish kid to a public school is no longer an option. Never in the history of France have so many Jewish children learned in private Jewish and Catholic schools.

Yes, even Catholic schools. Because there, at least, Jewish students don't get beaten up, and history teachers are not told by students that they refuse to attend classes on the Holocaust because they don't believe it happened.

And so Jews move out. According to the Jewish Agency, 9,880 western European Jews moved to Israel in 2015. It's 10% more than in 2014 and 50% more than in 2013. Out of those 9,880 Jews, 8,000 came from France (that's 80%).

The increase in French Aliya has been exponential in the past two years. The

average number of Jewish immigrants from France to Israel was about 2,000 a year

during the first decade of the new millennium. Now, we are talking about four

times the amount. It says something.

And the trend is likely to continue because Europe's Muslims are not going

anywhere. In fact, they keep coming in. Germany has accepted about 250,000

Syrian refugees in 2015. But before that, in 2014, Germany accepted over one

million immigrants. And there are still about 800,000 asylum seekers in Germany

waiting for their German citizenship.

Nearly all of these refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers are Muslim.

German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who made the fateful decision of accepting

hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria, warned recently that the

newcomers will have to check their antisemitism at the German border.

Like many other Germans, Angela Merkel was shocked to discover the extent of anti-Jewish prejudice among Syrian asylum seekers.

Today, Muslims make up 6% of the population of the European Union. Among the countries with the highest percentage are France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. The average percentage is expected to rise to 8% by 2030.

As recent tragic events in France and Belgium have shown, many European Muslims have radicalized over the years and their anti-Semitic hatred runs deep.

It is hard to estimate which percentage of European Muslims are radical and anti-Semitic, but that percentage does not need to be high in order to be lethal.

All terrorist attacks against European Jews in the past decade have been committed by Muslims. It only takes a handful of radicals to make a lot of victims.

In 1962, Algerian Jews had to run for their lives. It was "la valise ou le cercueil" (the suitcase or the coffin). Today, the fate of French and European Jews is not as bad, but the prospects do not look very good.

I do not know if Europe is going to fight for its values and principles, and if it is going to demand from Muslim immigrants to accept Western values and to check their anti-Semitism at the door. But after the terrorist attacks of 2015 in Paris, most French and European Jews feel that they can no longer afford to wait and find out whether Europe is serious about fighting Muslim anti-Semitism and violence.

The history of Europe has taught us that when Jews are killed for being Jewish, you just don't wait and hope for the best. Thankfully, this historical lesson seems to have been learned by many European Jews.

It is a pity for Europe, but a blessing for Israel. Theodore Herzl apparently didn't realize how right he was when he wrote over a hundred years ago in Paris that European Jews will always be considered strangers no matter what, and that danger will always hang over their head.

The solution, Herzl wrote, was for Jews to take their fate into their own hands and to build a free and successful country. This hasn't solved the problem of anti-Semitism, of course. Today, it is the Jewish state, and not only the Jews, that is accused of the world's ills.

But, at least, European Jews today have somewhere to go, a place where they can live a meaningful life, defend themselves, and build a country that is a beacon of Jewish renaissance and of scientific excellence.

As Herzl concluded in his book *The Jewish State*: "The world will be freed by our freedom; enriched by our wealth; and made greater by our greatness."