

CRIF National Convention of November 20, 2011 "The Jews of France in 2030"¹

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Dear friends,

It is an honor for me to be with you today to start a discussion on the future of the Jews of France. I thank CRIF's President, Mr. Richard Prasquier, for inviting me to this debate, which begins today and which I hope will lead to a structured process of strategic thinking, bringing together community leaders and civil society stakeholders to provide pragmatic and original answers to the internal and external challenges that French Jewry will be confronted with in the coming years.

To begin with, I must tell you that my perspective is somewhat different from this round table's other participants. As a researcher at JPPI, a strategic research center based in Jerusalem and dedicated to issues related to the future of the Jewish people as a whole, my perspectives on French Jewry are first and primarily historical, comparative and international. At the same time, my work is obviously fed by an ongoing dialogue with leaders and members of the Jewish community in France whose

¹ This communication was made in French. The original version was published on the CRIF website [Contribution de Dov Maimon, lors de la Convention](#) and was further extensively quoted by the French daily newspaper LACROIX [Un chercheur israélien invite les dirigeants juifs français à faire le choix d'un judaïsme moins exclusif](#).

commitment, as demonstrated by your large presence today; your attachment to Judaism and Israel is surprising in its intensity.

The insights I am pleased to share with you today are the result of a long and carefully thought out project conducted by the JPPI. We have interviewed several hundreds of Jewish leaders and thinkers from around the world, in order to anticipate what situation the Jewish people in general and European Jewry in particular will be in 2030. You can find this report and its methodology, which can be useful, on our website².

Because the French institutional crisis necessarily affects Jewish institutions it seems necessary, first, to draw a picture of the situation – the polarization – and then provide directions.

Let's start with an overview of the current situation:

The Jews of France comprise the third largest Jewish community in the world after Israel and the United States. Jewish culture has a unique place in the French intellectual world, in literature, as well as in philosophy, music and cinema, and Paris has become a place of Jewish creativity. The Jewish religious world is also booming. Over a hundred Torah and Talmud study groups run every evening in the French capital. The wealthy 17th Paris district alone happens to be the largest Jewish neighborhood in Europe. Last but not least, French culture obliges, Paris has become in twenty years the world capital of kosher gastronomy, counting more than two hundreds restaurants and some of the exclusive French gourmet cuisine. This last point illustrates my first insight:

1. The future of French Jewry is first and foremost related to the future of France

The preparation of our report has shown, surprisingly, a major difference between French and American, Australian or English leaders. While others have independent strategic thinking teams, who observe major developments, build scenarios and propose integrated plans, French Jews – like the rest of their fellow citizens – are worried about the future, complain and criticize their leaders, but few take the personal initiative to launch innovative projects.

In short, French people think that the best years are behind them (I refer to various studies including the large INSEAD eLab study named "Les Etats de la France 2010-2020³"), and are worried about their future. Beyond the crisis in Europe, which will have a major impact on Jewish communities, no one knows whether France will choose a mixed and multicultural society or return, like many of its neighbors, to a strong national and exclusive identity. In this context of uncertainty, Jews choose caution and take no position in this important national debate. Unfortunately, when one does not get involved, things still happen, and the strategy of laissez-faire is not necessarily the best.

The social split that characterizes French political culture is also reflected in the community. A majority of Jews do not recognize themselves in its institutions and ends up not setting foot there. They will assert their Jewishness through reading, listening to the Jewish radio, watching some programs on the Akadem e-learning website and, at best, travelling to Israel for the summer break. It is not easy to publicly affirm one's Jewish identity alone in the very secular France, and we cannot expect our young adults to assert their Jewish identity on non-empathetic campuses without institutional support.

² [European Jewry in 2030](#), JPPI Publications, October 2010.

³ [Les Etats de la France 2010-2020](#), INSEAD eLab, October 2011.

According to the above-mentioned statistics, the French people in general and French Jews in particular, do not project themselves 20 years ahead, and many are not convinced that their children will continue to live in France by then. With such a mindset, there is obviously no long-term planning, efforts to attract and prepare the best and the brightest for leadership are inadequate, and organizations – all well-intentioned – have no common vision or agenda.

The symptoms about which the Jewish street complains (lack of activities for 18-30 young adults, non-representativeness of the institutions, internal struggles, lack of career plans for professionals, lack of support to grassroots initiatives, disaffection of 70% of young adults) demonstrates a lack of project.

If we diagnose a lack of vision, our first recommendation would be to put in place a process to define a unifying project that can gather talent and energies that are far from lacking in the French Jewish community. We will return to this point in a moment.

2. Polarization – two different Jewish publics but only one finds its place within institutions

The second observation that I want to bring to your attention today is one of the most critical for the future of the Jews of France. If Jews studying the Talmud and attending synagogues are becoming more and more numerous – and we can only welcome this revival – they account for a small minority of the 700,000 or 500,000 French Jews. It is estimated, based on SPCJ (the Jewish community protection service) figures that the number of Jews who have even a tenuous link with the synagogue, namely those who come to the prayer of *Ne'ila* at Yom Kippur amounts to 160,000 and this figure is corroborated by additional communal indicators. We observe in France more than elsewhere, a phenomenon of polarization. The visible minority does not exceed 100,000 people and 80% of others do not fit in the institutions. To the outside observer, it appears that the choice to focus on the core community at the expense of other forms of Jewish engagement is the organizing principle that governs Jewish institutions in France. This model, based on the legacy of Napoleon's centralization project and developed after the Second World War, is not necessarily appropriate to the postmodern era.

This model, where children of mixed couples are left out of Jewish educational structures, was probably a lesser evil when the rate of intermarriages was infinitesimal, but is this policy appropriate now? The solutions, perhaps excellent in the past, are not necessarily relevant today.

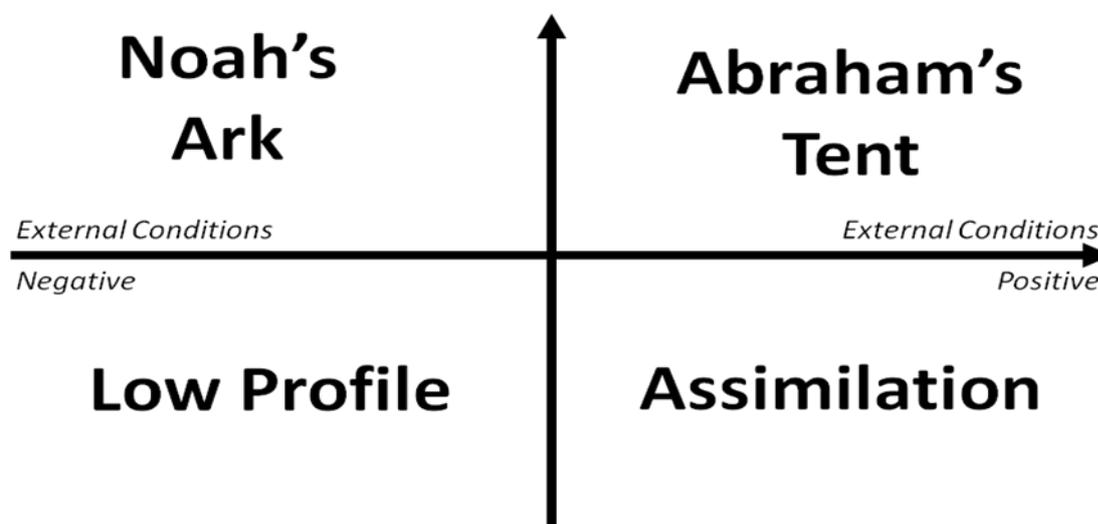
3. A choice within four existential positions

Four major options are open to French Judaism and each of these options has advantages and disadvantages. To avoid the overused terminology, I choose to use the paradigms drawn from the biblical Book of Genesis (which we now read in the synagogues). No choice is better than another in absolute terms. Swiss, Italian, and Brazilian Jews choose the strategy of adopting a low profile, the Jews of Bnei-Braq Mea Shearim the *Noah's Ark* and the Jews of Los Angeles the *Abraham's tent* that they call *Tikkun Olam*⁴. The core community of Jews in France and its institutions are now in *Noah's Ark*.

⁴ Sociologist Max Weber makes a distinction between two modes of religious organizational institutions that he calls sect and church, making a difference between the exclusiveness of the "sect" archetype and the "religious community" that is

Unfortunately, the 80% left are worse off and, for historical reasons, do not receive services that could meet their expectation. Our studies show that they care about their Jewish identity but want Judaism in a non-Jewish environment, do not want to be separated from non-Jews, and Jewish identity centered on worship, the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and defense of Israel motivates them moderately. Many young Jews have difficulty with this model and in the absence of a tent where they would be accepted as they are, they choose, by default or by choice, assimilation.

What kind of community do we want to build for our children?



French Judaism will face, in the coming years, very serious issues that will particularly concern the residents of the *Ark*. The ban on ritual slaughter in Holland, on circumcision in Scandinavia and scheduling exams on Jewish holidays are the beginnings of a broader phenomenon linked to demographic and socio-cultural changes in Europe. If tomorrow the Jews of France are no more than 150,000, because many will have felt too crowded in the *Ark* and would have preferred to choose other horizons, then the political influence, moral and electoral of such a Judaism whose main interest is in itself and is not interested in social issues will be reduced.

The British Orthodox Jews have understood that if they do not ally with the reformers and secular Jews, they could not defend the public funding of their schools and their synagogues anymore and therefore have formed the Jewish Leadership Council. History has taught us that we are all in the same boat and there is no guarantee that residents of the *Ark* will be better protected than others from the elements.

more inclusive. In their book *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1992) say the difference between a sect and a church lies in the degree of tension between the group of believers and the outside world: "it is necessary to distinguish the two primary forms of religious organizations – churches and sects. These are best conceptualized as the end points of a continuum made up of the degree of tension between religious organizations and their sociocultural environments. ... To the degree that a religious body sustains beliefs and practices at variance with the surrounding environment, tension will exist between its members and outsiders. ... When a religious body has no beliefs or practices setting it apart from its environment, no tension will exist. Churches are religious bodies in a relatively low state of tension with their environments. Sects are religious bodies in a relatively high state of tension with their environments". (p. 41)

The tent of Abraham is a model to be developed in the French context. If today almost nothing is done with respect to young Jews 18 to 35 years of age, and if we do not encourage or fund initiatives toward enhancing Jewish commitment – at the example of Taglit-Birthright, Limmud, Jhub, ROI, PresenTense, KolDor and Moishe House which have transformed the Anglo-Saxon Judaism – we have every chance of losing the strength of influence of French Judaism. I would simply note that communities that have opted for a less exclusive and more diversified Judaism during the past fifteen years, those who have chosen to diversify Jewish commitment and make room for young people, have seen their intermarriage rates stabilize. Such is the case in England, Canada and Australia, whereas in France there is every indication that mixed marriages are becoming more frequent. One of the recommendations of JPPI is named 35/35/35: 35% of members of central committees of organizations should be aged under 35 and 35% of budgets should be dedicated to this population. Both in England and the United States, young people have shown that when we trust them they come with innovative projects that meet their real needs and lifestyle.

Two final comments about the choices you and you alone can make:

- The *default strategy* – i.e., continue by inertia what has been done in the past – is also a choice.
- It is critical that the major actors agree on a common existential choice. Each vision carries its own implications for institutional priorities-- for resource allocation and operating procedures—and are totally different. Just as we cannot imagine a victorious army, where the infantry would go north, aircraft south and tanks to the east, it is fundamental that within a community, the objectives of social, religious and politics are coordinated around a common, unifying existential vision.

How to start a process of strategic thinking?

I want to share with you four methodologies of reflection that I have observed carefully. Of course the Jews of France will have to choose the model that best suits their needs. The important thing is that the strategic thinking group, the think-tank or commission, operates on a non-partisan, independent and inclusive mode, and should have the credibility of being a neutral and reliable platform where all feel respected, and where all options can be considered equally. The goal is that by the end of the process a common agenda will emerge, be shared and is able to unify the largest number.

1. **The British model.** All Jewish institutions have mandated an English commission that has interviewed key stakeholders and reviewed existing data. It identified six key issues and has published a white paper that is actually a call to the opinions of each other. After one year of work, it has proposed solutions that have been submitted to decision makers to open a public debate. This consensual method was a huge success. The proposals were adopted by the institutions, budgets were found outside the core community and institutions appropriate to different audiences were created. Attendance at English Jewish schools rose from 25% to 85% and initiatives have multiplied.
2. **The American model.** JPPI organizes, on a regular basis, seminars with leaders of major American Jewish organizations. JPPI produces papers that summarize the issues and options for intervention in the areas in question and the American and Israeli participants, with the help of major donors, initiate projects for the future. This is the standard think tank methodology.
3. **The Italian model.** UCEI, the main national Jewish organization, organized, at the end of October, the first seminar of a series of four. It was dedicated to working on a vision of the future, in a common place but separately in four parallel workshops that gather respectively the rabbis, the presidents of communities, the leading professionals and the young communal leaders. During two days, I lead a vision development module separately but according to the same methodology

in the two first groups. We then gathered the various stakeholder groups to reconcile their visions. This energy consuming process seems to be promising and is being investigated in additional locations.

4. The latest model is an **independent reflection group**. JPPI is convening in several major cities such prospective exercises, and the group that has been meeting in Paris for several months promises to be outstanding. Their initial analysis is exciting and very promising. Some members of this group are in the audience and I invite them, once we open the debate, to share with us their insights about the process and their expectations.

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