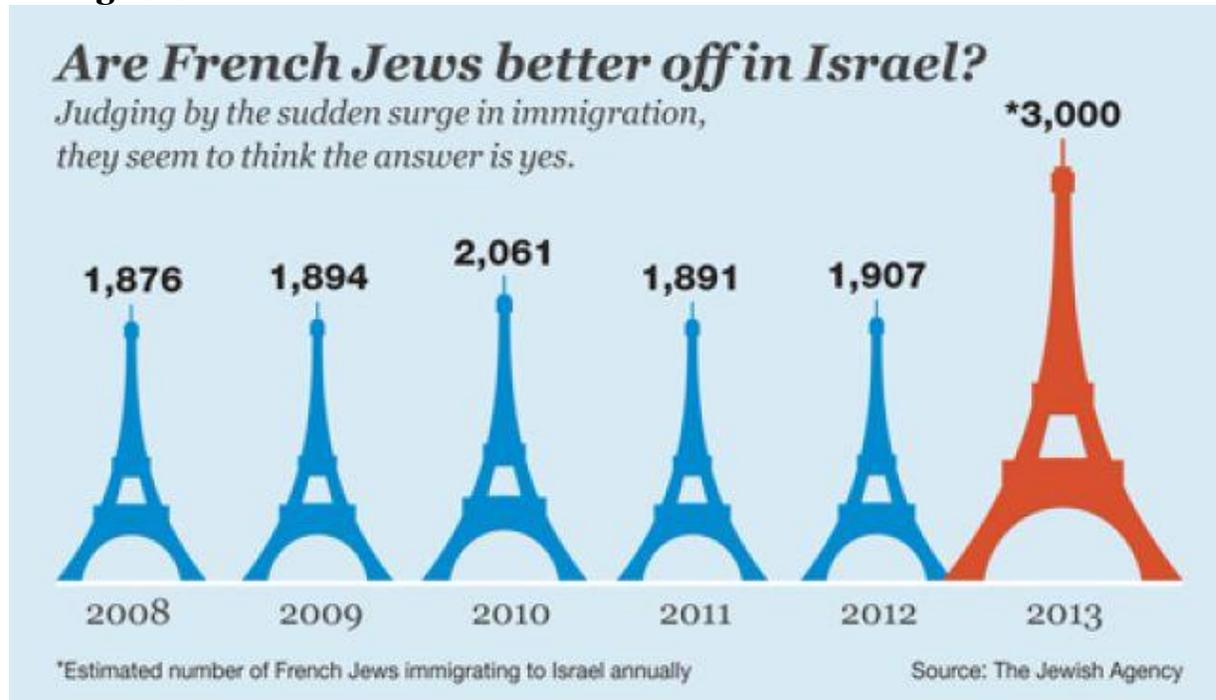


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Fleeing bad economy, French Jews flock to Israel

Jewish immigration figures have risen almost 60 percent compared to last year, with singles and pensioners making up the bulk of the new immigrants.



Infographic: Are French Jews better off in Israel?

Barely a few hours into her weeklong trip, Noemi Kahloon has already made up her mind: On her next visit to Israel, she says, the one she plans to take after high school, she'll be coming on a one-way ticket.

The 12th grade French high school student has lots of family in Israel, scattered in places like Netanya, Ashdod and Dimona, which is why she's not worried about immigrating on her own. Besides, she's sure that once she comes, the rest of the family will follow. "It'll be just the push my mom and dad need," she says.



Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky with young revelers.
Photo courtesy of the Jewish agency.

The same goes for Hilary Soria, her classmate at the ORT school in Villiers-le-Bel, located just outside Paris. Soria, too, is determined to make a go of life in Israel, but may wait a bit longer – until she’s completed her studies at university. “For me, one of the main reasons to come is that I have my grandparents, aunt and cousins here, and I miss them all a lot.”

The two girls are among 1,000 French high school students participating this week in a program known as Bac Bleu Blanc (“Blue White Seniors”). Over the past 10 years, this Jewish Agency-sponsored program has brought more than 8,500 French teenagers to Israel during their winter break for a whirlwind tour of the country. All in their final year of high school, the students come from 25 different Jewish schools, along with a few public schools, from all over France.

This first stop on their trip, rather symbolically, is where it all started – Independence Hall in Tel Aviv. Just as the first group of 30 jetlagged teenagers exits the building where Israel’s Declaration of Independence was signed, another group of 30 jetlagged teenagers files in, bundled up in hats and scarves on this unusually cold Mediterranean morning.

Today’s itinerary includes a stop in Jaffa, a visit to a university and a trip down to the Negev. The culmination of this jam-packed week will be an internship and study fair on Thursday at the Jerusalem convention center, where they’ll learn about their different options in Israel, should they decide to return.

The Jewish Agency and other institutions that promote and handle immigration have good reason to believe they will -- especially if recent trends continue.

Based on tentative figures, immigration from France is about to set a high of recent years. According to Ariel Kandel, the Jewish Agency envoy in Paris, the number of French Jews immigrating to Israel should top 3,000 by the end of the year – a jump of almost 60 percent from 2012. In recent years, the annual average number of immigrants from France has ranged between 1,800 and 1,900.

The last time the French immigration figures were that high, notes Kandel, was in 2005, and before that, in the years following the 1967 Six-Day War.

The pool of interested candidates, he estimates, is many times larger. “What we’re seeing is a huge increase in the number of people attending our weekly information evenings,” he notes. “In 2012, we’d get about 70 coming each week. Since the beginning of 2013, we’re getting about 200 a week. That translates into about 800 a month and 10,000 a year. Obviously people don’t bring their kids to these events, so we have to take that into account as well.”

With almost 500,000 members, the Jewish community in France is the largest in Europe and the third largest in the world. So what is driving so many of them away?

Kandel points to a confluence of factors, some longstanding and others more recent. “The French Jews are very Zionist, and that’s not a new thing,” he notes. “About 70 percent of them have visited Israel at least once – a much higher rate than anywhere else. Then we have the shooting at the Jewish school in Toulouse, which even though it happened three years ago, is still having an effect. The more recent development is the economic crisis, which is causing many educated French Jews to see startup nation as a better option for themselves. And then there are the numbers themselves – as more and more people come, those left behind who thought it might be difficult to move to Israel are starting to reconsider.”

The two main groups coming, he says, are young singles and retirees, both of which have less at stake than families with children. Their preferred destinations once they arrive are the big cities. “Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, Ashdod, Netanya and Ra’anana, that’s where they’re heading – not the Negev, the Galilee or the Golan,” he notes. “They don’t like going out to the periphery.”

Mickael Bensadoun, the executive director of Gvachim, a non-profit that helps new immigrants with career placement, encounters many of them. Lately, he says, a growing number are opting for internships so that they can test the waters before they make a commitment to stay. “They’re a very entrepreneurial group,” says Bensadoun, a French immigrant himself, “and what’s nice is that they bring a French touch here with them.

For example, I have some women now who are setting up their own skin products business. I have others opening a patisserie.”

One of the key challenges French Jews face when immigrating to Israel, says Kandel, is adjusting to a much higher cost of living. “In France many things, such as housing, are still paid for and subsidized by the government, which isn’t the case in Israel,” he notes. “Many people are under the impression that French Jews are rich, but that’s a misconception, and for this reason, the adjustment is often difficult for them.”

Neither is the cultural transition simple, he adds. “America is much closer to Israeli culturally than is France,” he observes. “The French are more formal and more concerned with etiquette, which is another thing that makes adjustment to life in Israel difficult.”

Dov Maimon, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute where he specializes in Europe, has been urging the government to exploit what he calls the “window of opportunity” created by both rising anti-Semitism and economic decline in France to bring massive numbers of educated and highly-skilled Jews from there to Israel.

“About 17,000 French Jews opened files with the Jewish agency immigration offices this year – compare that with 7,000 in the United States,” he notes. “But the majority won’t end up coming because they have other options like London, New York, Los Angeles and Miami. The big challenge is to channel these people to Israel.”

To make Israel a more attractive destination for French Jews, Maimon says the government needs to become more pro-active and focus in particular on three areas: removing the bureaucratic bottlenecks that make it difficult for French professionals to obtain certification in Israel, providing financial incentives to French industrialists and entrepreneurs who move their companies to Israel and increasing funding to Birthright, the program that brings young Jewish adults to Israel on free 10-day trips. “There are very few Birthright participants from France,” he observes. “That’s because there are few institutions in France that can provide funding to the organization. All the Jewish institutions there are poor, so if Israel wants more Birthright participants from France, it needs to provide a bigger budget for this.”

Emmy Fizon might be considered the poster girl for the Bac Bleu Blanc program. The 20-year-old, who attended a regular public school in France, participated in the program four years ago and moved to Israel six months later. Having just completed her military service, she works as a youth leader for the program today. “The truth is I already knew I wanted to move to Israel before I came on the program,” she reveals during a momentary break from her charges. “I knew it when I was just 14. I was here on a trip with my parents at the time, and we were visiting my brother, who was here serving in the army then. That’s when I knew I wanted to be here.”