

Allocution de Robert Ejnes, Executive Director of Crif
Jewish Agency Board – Paris – June 2016

Mr President, dear Nathan Sharansky
Dear Minister Sofa Landver
Mr Director General, dear Allan Hoffman
Dear friends,

As we're meeting this morning at the Jewish Agency meeting, let me start with a joke on the French Aliyah.

A French recent immigrant in Israel was asked if he was happy for his having made Aliyah in Israel. "Certainly he answered. I finally found my true identity here. As long as I lived in France, I was treated as a Jew. Here I am finally called a Frenchman."

I was thinking. I was given 10 minutes to talk about the French Jewry. How should I do it? Should I start by the positive side; i.e. all is fine for the Jews in France, or by the negative side, i.e. anti-Semitism has never been so strong since World War 2 and the Vichy period. Because, as the matter of fact, both are true statements.

I shall start with the positive side.

Jews have lived in France for the past 2000 years. They arrived here after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and have been living in this country since then in different conditions.

The Cha'ham mostly quoted in all the Yeshivot in the whole world was born in 1040 and lived most of his life not far from here. His complete name was רבי שלמה בן יצחק. He is better known by his acronym RaChi.

It is in France that Jews officially became full citizens, in 1791, during the French Revolution.

If anti-Semitism has always existed in France, it got to a national dimension with the Dreyfus Affair between 1894 and 1906. Herzl, who was Press correspondent in Paris during this time, was inspired and wrote "the Jewish State".

This period also marks the beginning of a very strong Zionist movement within the Jewish community of France.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the situation of the Jews in France seems so good that a lot of immigrants from Germany and Poland start coming in France, to come to a country where Jews are "As happy as God in France", as the famous Yiddish saying of the time.

During the Shoah about 76 000 Jews from a total population of 200 000 were deported to the death camps where from only few will return. The French Government in Vichy collaborated with the Nazis, and most of the Jews are arrested by French police. But at the same time, many Jews were saved by non-Jews who are honor of the French people.

In 1943, in the midst of the Shoah, the Crif was created as a federation of Jewish institutions to protect and represent the Jews of France, combat the occupying forces, and work for the creation of a Jewish state in Israel.

The Crif today is a federation of 72 associations. Its missions have globally remained the same: to represent and defend the Jews, to combat anti-Semitism and racism, and to advocate Israel.

The French Jewry was totally transformed during the 60's, when the Jews from Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia arrived. The distribution of the Jewish community moved from a large Ashkenazic majority at the beginning of the 60's, to a Sefaradic majority which is still the case.

Up to the seventies, most of the Jewish children went to public schools and there are very few Jewish private schools.

Jews in France are very much integrated in the French society, in all activities and domains. Assimilation is one of the major issues we have to face.

The ties between the French Jews and Israel are very tight. A lot of Jews have family connections with Israel and many have visited Israel or go to Israel regularly. Many French Jews have children in Israel, who left after graduating from High School to Universities, Yeshivot or Tsahal. French 'hayalim constituted the largest foreign population in Tsahal in 2015. More and more Jews also have their parents retire in Israel.

The Jewish population of France is estimated to 500 000, less on a strict halachic definition, more on a looser definition. The geographic distribution is essentially in the Paris area and around large centers such as Marseille, Nice, Lyon, Strasbourg, and Toulouse.

The number of synagogues has increased until recent years. The number of Kosher restaurants in the Paris area is larger than in New York ... and Tel Aviv.

There are also many Jewish Community Centers with much activity. The study centers – batei midrashoth – is increasing. The number of Ulpanim is growing. It is very easy to find Jewish or Hebrew classes. The Jewish life is very vivid in France.

Let's talk now of the negative side

Do you know how to find a Synagogue, a Jewish school or a Jewish community center in France? It's very easy; there are military forces in front of them.

The reason is anti-Semitism and terrorism.

In 2006, a young man, Ilan Halimi was abducted, tortured and killed, because he was Jewish. In 2012, the Ozar Hatora school in Toulouse was attacked by a Jihadist killing 4, Rabbi Jonathan Sandler and his two sons Gavriel (3) and Ariele (6), and Myriam Monsonogo (8). In 2015 after a Jihadist attack on Charlie Hebdo and against police officers, a Kosher Hypermarket was attacked, killing four: Philippe Braham (45), François-Michel Saada (64), Yoav Hattab (21) and Yohan Cohen (20), only because they were preparing for Shabbat on a Friday morning. May their memory be a blessing.

This wave of anti-Semitism actually started back in October 2000 during second Intifada, after a TV false news report showing a young Palestinian being killed in a fire exchange between terrorist and

Israeli forces. This TV coverage was followed by a vague of anti-Semitic attacks of Synagogues and Jews.

The number of anti-Semitic acts is followed jointly by the SPCJ, the Jewish security organization, and the Ministry of Interior. The annual number of anti-Semitic acts, which had been below 100 until 1999, jumped to more than 700 in 2000 and remained at this average since then, reaching 805 in 2015. Moreover, the anti-Semitic acts which target less than 1% of the population represent around 50% of all anti-Semitic and racist acts reported in France.

I met Elie Wiesel in New York a few months back. When I asked him what he thought about the growth of anti-Semitic acts in France, he first answered that France has always been anti-Semitic. When I insisted and mentioned a multiplication of Jewish acts, he said "but are the French Jews worried?". When I said yes, he said "This is bad". Yes, some Jews in France are worried.

In 2002 a book was published by a group of high school professors showing anti-Semitism in the public system. The book was called "the lost territories of the Republic". It made a terrible analysis.

In recent years, we have seen an internal Aliyah of French Jews, leaving "the lost territories" to move to more secured areas. When you ask whether one can wear a Kippa in the street, the answer is it depends where. Certainly not in the lost territories of the Republic. But without any problem in the secured area, such as where we are now or in Paris western neighborhoods.

It is estimated that only one third of Jewish students remain in the public system. Two thirds are in the private sector, half in Jewish schools and the rest in Christian schools. This is a reality. This phenomenon is due both to an increasing quality level of the Jewish schools and to a growing desire of Jewish parents to take their children out of the public system.

We have made analyses of anti-Semitism in France. Fondapol, an independent think tank has made a poll in 2014. This poll shows that anti-Semitism is strong among three population segments: the extreme right, the extreme left and the Muslim population.

The extreme right expresses the old type anti-Semitism, of Christian and Fascist origin. The extreme left, which claims fighting racism are "only" anti-Zionists. But every evidence shows that they only express anti-Semitism and consider Israel as the Jews of the nations. As for the Muslim population, the poll show that anti-Semitic prejudices come essentially from mosques and family heritages.

A more recent qualitative analysis that we have made with Focus groups of different segments of the French population showed that Jews were reproached their solidarity, their ties with Israel. And moreover, many said that Zionism was extremism.

In this context, which has to be included in a financial crisis environment, the number of French Jews having made Aliyah has considerably increased. From 2000 in 2012, it jumped to 3500 in 2013, 7000 in 2014 and 8000 in 2015.

The Jewish leadership is nor encouraging nor discouraging Aliyah. We say that this being a personal decision, but that Jews should be allowed to live in peace wherever they chose to, especially if they desire to stay in France.

Having drawn a quite shallow image, what do we do? What can we do?

First we fight, and second, we continue to fight. We fight for the security of the Jews in France. We fight against anti-Semitism and against BDS, the latest form of anti-Semitism. And we must fight to make sure that Jews will be assured to be able to live peacefully in this country, with the possibility to practice their religion without constraints.

In order to achieve these goals, we permanently discuss with government members and members of parliament, administrations, we discuss with journalists, with representatives of the civil society, with other Jewish communities in the world, with Israel leadership.

We are therefore very happy to have you here today to proclaim together

Am Israel Hai