



Book Review: Didier Long and Dov Maïmon: *La fin des juifs de France?*

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Home of the largest Jewish community in Europe and (still) the second largest in the Jewish diaspora after the USA, France, since the end of World War II, has represented one of the liveliest paradigms of Jewish life. More than other large Jewish population centers worldwide, France witnessed the predicament of large-scale immigration, acculturation, social mobility, and integration around a relatively small remnant of veterans. Among the different Jewish immigrant strands, following the pre-World War II East European inflow, the more remarkable critical mass came from the post-war exodus from the former French protectorates of Morocco and of Tunisia, and especially from the French Department of Algeria. De-colonization between 1954 and 1962 generated a more than twofold growth in the size of French Jewry and significantly regenerated its community structure. Besides numbers, newcomers brought about significant rejuvenation, along with great revitalization of religious and community life. Most new immigrants were French speaking, and many held French citizenship (especially the Algerians) and were thus eligible for governmental support in their repatriation to the mainland. But, more significantly, a large contingent arrived from among the intellectual and professional elites of the ancient and great North-African Jewries. The encounter of these new elites with the older ones of European stock created unparalleled new stimuli and a remarkable role of intellectual and spiritual leadership extending far beyond the limits of the Hexagon.

Not insignificantly, the other half of the great exodus from North Africa made *aliyah* to Israel—bringing there a higher share of the more mystically religious and of the lower middle classes. The tumultuous processes of absorption in Israel of North African Jews, who came from the extreme Occident of the continent—the Maghreb—but were nevertheless labeled as Orientals, had a bleeding and lasting impact on the immigrants themselves and on Israeli society. In France, things were not simple either, but perhaps the newcomers were better equipped to negotiate

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with the local settling authorities. Jewish immigrants were initially scattered geographically by the French, who were fearful of excessive segregation of the repatriated. Over time, many Jews found their way to the dominant Région Parisienne, to selected neighborhoods in the central capital, and especially to notable and peculiar concentrations in its suburbs and in some large provincial cities.

For over two generations, Jews in France were part of a remarkable process of social mobility and integration in a society whose declared emblem—no matter how unrealistic and coercive—was national centralism and repugnance of the so-called *communautarisme*. The perceived tendency of ethnoreligious groups to stress their particularistic identities over the universal republican ideal was eventually bound to raise its head and to cause severe trouble to the Jacobine illusion—the centralistic concept of one unified France. One characteristic expression of this spirit was the long-lasting absence of any reference to religion in national censuses and even the ignorance (or even ban) of ethnicity in the academic study of French society. Jews from North Africa, in particular, were able to thrive in such imagined, but after all congenial environment of French *laïcité*. Some of them reached top positions as Presidential counsels, ministers, entrepreneurs, and influential academicians. Virtually all key positions within the organized Jewish community—from Chief Rabbis to Presidents of major organizations—were held at some point in time by North African Jewish immigrants.

France, however, was also the landing shore of large masses of other immigrants from the former French colonial empire. The ethnic make-up of the country tended to become more visibly Muslim and African. This created excellent opportunities for France's dominant national sports teams, which tended to incorporate one or two pristine Frenchmen among a majority of outstanding athletes of immigrant origin. Not inconsequentially, political polarization increased in the country between a nationalist, anti-immigration, overtly racist, rightist front, and a growing leftist formation openly advocating the support and vote of immigrants and their children. Contrary to standard social theory, the second and third immigrant generations did not seem to adhere to the lofty principles of French assimilationism, and the concept of *laïcité* was being eroded by growing spots of militant Islamism. One day, years ago, while the then-incumbent President of France was lecturing on TV about "One People, One Nation," the streets of Paris were burning, shops were looted, cars were overturned, and the police were attacking bands of demonstrators who were asserting their ethnic communitarian protest.

The consequences of these transformations for the Jewish community of France were long suppressed. They constitute the main subject of investigation of *La fin des juifs de France?* Didier Long and Dov Maïmon come to this book from very different paths. Didier Long is a former Catholic monk who, in the course of time, discovered Judaism, cast off the soutane to become a consultant with McKinsey, and has written several books about the dialog between Jews and Christians. Dov Maïmon is an engineer from the Technion and INSEA with a Ph.D. in Islamic and Medieval studies. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute in Jerusalem, where he leads the Grand Strategy toward Islam project. Both authors hold a view of Judaism that, in different ways, can be termed normative. Both have rich experience in intellectual work and community activity in the Jewish realm and have broadened

their analytic tools through in-depth qualitative investigations of the major Jewish and French national strands of power, administration, and associationism.

Long and Maïmon skillfully, if somewhat emphatically, review the origins and numbers of French Jewry and turn to a survey of antisemitism in France. In France, more than in other European countries, terrorist attacks claimed victims, most notably in October 1980 at the Rue Copernic synagogue, and in August 1982 in Rue des Rosiers at the heart of Paris's historical Jewish quarter—one month before the Sabra and Shatila massacre provided legitimacy to all sorts of pretended “vindication” actions elsewhere in the world. And then, fast forward to the attacks in Toulouse in 2012, at Charlie Hebdo and Hypercacher, and Bataclan in 2015, and in Nice's Promenade des Anglais in 2016. While the rising number of new immigrants from France to Israel during those years was easily attributed to the flight from Islamic terror, it appeared to be far more strongly correlated with the economic crisis that hit France during those years.

If these were the symptoms of more things to come, the faith of French Jewry in the role and ability of the surrounding system to protect them became gradually weaker. This was especially so considering a Muslim constituency that garnered growing demographic weight and political influence, and a political center unable to hold its own under the pressure of Le Pen's National Front from the right and the Melanchon defiant-pro-Islamist movement from the left. The Jewish vote, once small but strategically concentrated, is no longer a factor in such a polarized context. The authors note that about a quarter of French Jews live in towns and neighborhoods where their freedom of speech as well as their physical safety is at stake. This would seem to call for immediate relocation—but to where?

Long and Maïmon interviewed hundreds of informants, major and minor protagonists, about the future of French Jewry. They encountered a deep sense of perplexity, as well as great uncertainty about the path to be taken. Jews in France—but also in some other European countries—live now in a sort of cage. The authors firmly believe that the Jews of France should leave the cage at some point, and they advise them to get ready. Like in the metaphor of the canary singing in the coal mine, the Jews of France are breathing the polluted underground air, recording the temperature of a sick *République*. After October 7, 2023, they stopped singing.

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