CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES | מרכז לחקר הקהילה היהודית

מכון ירושלים
למחקרים פדרליים
JERUSALEM INSTITUTE
FOR FEDERAL STUDIES

JERUSALEM LETTER

No. 7 - Adar II 3, 5738/March 12, 1978

FRENCH JEWRY AND THE FRENCH ELECTIONS - I

The political perspective of the Jewish community in France underwent a veritable upheaval after 1967. For a multitude of reasons, Israel became the determining factor in the participation of the Jews in French politics. Of course, as Alfred Grosser has noted, "It is an invariable fact that the entire French electorate tends to vote less for than against a particular party." It nevertheless remains true that this is a new phenomenon for the French Jews. Under the Third Republic, and even immediately after the Second World War, voting for still prevailed among this segment of the population (for the republic, for liberalism or for socialism, etc.). However, since 1967, they have found themselves gravitating, in their voting pattern as well as in other forms of political expression, towards the left-center and center of the French political spectrum. There is a minority which continues to give staunch support for the Gaullist and Communist parties, but these are marginal groups in comparison to the community as a whole.

COLLECTIVE JEWISH IDENTITY

In 1967, two crucial events occurred in close succession, as a result of which the community began gradually to assume a collective Jewish identity: the embargo on the "Mirages" during the Six Day War and de Gaulle's "petite phrase" concerning the Jewish people. Israel rapidly became the pole around which the political attitudes of the French Jews converged. The symbol of this transformation was the establishment of a National Committee for the Coordination of Jewish Organizations for Israel. For the first time, this body gave "political instructions" to the Jews: to obtain the signatures of as many people as possible on a declaration of solidarity; to intercede with elected representatives; to intercede with the makers of public opinion. Claude Kelman, Vice President of the Fonds Social Juif Unifié and of the National Coordination Committee declared:

> At this point, I would like to stress a very important fact: our action is the result of our taking a clear stand, without ambiguity or evasiveness. We are acting as Jews, our reactions are Jewish reactions.

And he added:

> French Jewry, whose passivity was until recently deplored, has emerged from its lethargy. (L'Arche, No. 124 June '67, p. 3)

This strongly critical reaction to de Gaulle and his government seems to have influenced even the fringe of traditional "French Israelites", formerly opposed to any kind of concerted Jewish stand. The most representative figure of this group was undoubtedly Raymond Aron. We should note, however, the persistence, even after 1967, of a very marginal sector of the community which continued to reject the idea of a Jewish political identity.

As for the electoral impact of the events of 1967, had elections, whether parliamentary or presidential, been held immediately after the "petite phrase" of November 27, there is little doubt that we could quite accurately have measured the

12 Moshe Hess St., Jerusalem Tel. 02-225874 רח' משה הס 12 ירושלים טל.

decline in Jewish support for de Gaulle and Gaullism in quarters with Jewish populations of high density. However, the last elections had been held in March 1967, two months before the war. The next elections took place after the disturbances and the general strike of 1968, and do not reflect the changes which occurred in the Jewish voting pattern. In fact, the disorders and the danger of a revolutionary takeover by the extreme left traumatized not only the middle classes and the bourgeoisie, but all the social strata. The Jewish community, too, was traumatized. While the Jewish vote for de Gaulle declined, so too did their support of the leftist parties. But the situation was not clear, and the elections of 1968 were therefore not conclusive.

It nevertheless remains true that the Jewish voters began to abandon Gaullism in successive waves - in 1969 (the referendum and the elections of G. Pompidou), in 1973 (parliamentary elections), in 1974 (presidential elections), under de Gaulle, under G. Pompidou, and under V. Giscard d'Estaing. The Jews increasingly avoided voting for the Gaullist party, transferring their votes to other parties. This phenomenon is typical of what is generally called a "vote of rejection." Supporters of de Gaulle and Pompidou obviously tried to check this trend by several means: 1) by presenting candidates who were either Jewish or known for their strongly pro-Israel positions in the districts with populations of high Jewish density (le Marais, Belleville, le Faubourgh Montmartre, the 16th arrondissement); 2) by contacting and trying to conciliate the Jewish organizations; and 3) by raising the specter of "dual loyalty" in order to try and "win back" the "French Israelite" fringe of the community. But it is unlikely that these attempts had any real impact on halting the decline of Jewish support for the Gaullists.

SHIFT TO LEFT-CENTER

A shift towards the center occurred on the part of the Jewish community, based on two recent phenomena; the anti-Israeli policies of the coalition in power and a more restricted phenomenon, the fear of communism of the Jewish middle classes. The former caused some in the community to shift from the right towards the center of the spectrum; the latter (the rise of leftist groups, the antisemitism of the extreme left) shifted the community from the left towards the center.

Thus, the Jewish votes seems increasingly to have gravitated towards two political forces:

a) The non-communist left, that is, the Socialist Party and the Left Radical Movement. The Socialist Party has been totally restored and rebuilt by F. Mitterand, and in 1978 its image is well-suited to attracting large segments of the community, such as youth, leadership, the intellectuals, and liberals. The Socialist Party makes a point of frequently affirming its pro-Israeli stand, specifically in order to attract the Jewish voters abandoning Gaullism. It is almost indubitable that, on March 12 and 19, a large part of the Jewish electorate will vote for the non-communist left. However, a certain hesitancy does persist, resulting from four well-known facts: the Socialist Party has an alliance with the Communist Party; some of Mitterand's associates have consistently affirmed pro-Arab views; the extreme leftist currents, in the minority within the Socialist Party, are quite strong; the Jeunesses Socialistes are clearly anti-Israel.

b) The parties of the center. These include the Republican Party, the traditional Radical party, and the heirs of the Christian-Democratic current. The parties of the center are theoretically favorable to Israel, but they have since 1974 been a part of the governmental coalition, and for the 1978 elections the center forces and the Giscardiens have regrouped into a single unit: the Union for French Democracy.

As the political system of France leaves decisions on foreign policy entirely to the president of the republic, they find themselves willy-nilly associated with his anti-Israel and pro-Arab policies, and therefore in an uncomfortable position to solicit the Jewish vote.

In sum, at the next election, we shall witness a very clear narrowing of the Jewish political spectrum and a certain gravitation of the Jewish vote in the direction of the left-center of the political scene, support for Israel being the determining factor.

Thus, the results of the poll carried out by the SOFRES (one of the principal institutes of sample surveys in France) are startling. This poll was conducted on a representative sampling of the entire population of France, ages 21 and above. One of the questions asked was as follows: "Do you think that the Jews generally lean to the extreme right, the right, the left, or the extreme left, or that being a Jew has no influence on political views?" Responses:

The Jews generally lean to the extreme right	4%
The Jews generally lean to the right	21%
The Jews generally lean to the left	7%
The Jews generally lean to the extreme left	0%
Being a Jew has no influence on political views	42%
No opinion	26%
	100%

According to Doris Bensimon, who has analyzed the results of this poll:

> One out of four Frenchmen assert that, from a political point of view, the Jews are situated generally on the right or even the extreme right. These responses are surprising, since the traditional right, as a rule, never concealed antisemitic leanings. A remarkable fact: none of the subjects placed the Jews on the extreme left. Opinions on the position of the Jews in French politics are probably influenced by opinions about Israeli politics.

INFORMATION, CONSULTATION, THREATS

The voting pattern does not, however, exhaust the possibilities for the political expression of the Jewish community. What are its other forms of expression? Information, consultation and threats.

In this regard, special note should be taken of the role played by the principal organs of the Jewish press since 1967. L'Arche, Tribune Juive Hebdo, L'Information Juive, Les Nouveaux Cahiers, etc. have adopted an increasingly militant attitude on political issues which concern the community, and more precisely on the Mediterranean policy of the government. The most actively involved journal is undoubtedly the Tribune Juive Hebdo, edited by J. Grunewald and H. Smolarski. Its criticisms have become increasingly acute, self-imposed restraints have been lifted and the tone adopted with regard to the government has become biting (the Tribune Juive Hebdo called for a boycott of the members of the government). Moreover, the documentation centers on the Middle East have multiplied in number, and the members of parliament, as well as politica groups of all factions, today receive information on Israel which is issued directly by the organs of the Jewish community. Mention should also be made of the "moral and political platform" recently published by the Conseil Représentatif des Juifs de France.

Consultation can play a role similar to that of unilateral information. It can be either "institutionalized" or "incidental". The first case is that of the relatively infrequent visits by the leaders of the Consistoire Central of the CRIF with the French President or Prime Minister. There is also "incidental" consultation -- for example when Chief Rabbi Kaplan, at the Synagogue de la Victoire and in the presence of government representatives, expresses his reprobation of an official anti-Israeli act. Moreover, it is clear that, since 1967, the spiritual leaders have taken stronger stands on political issues than the communal leaders.

Threats constitute the third means of action for any pressure group, but the Jews of France seem as yet reluctant to utilize it. The year 1969 did, however, mark a certain turning point. Since the presidential elections which brought G. Pompidou to power, candidates have increasingly been required to take definite stands on the issues which are of interest to the Jewish community, including French policy towards Israel, the situation of the Soviet Jews, and the campaign against anti-semitism. They are asked to undertake certain "obligations" as to their future actions. Between elections, attempts are made to threaten members of parliament with thwarting their reelection, should they fail to meet these obligations.

Actually, this use of threats, an attempt at American-style "lobbying," exists in only embryonic form among French Jews -- first, for they have not yet sufficiently matured from the time when the community lived in fear of reproaches of "dual loyalty"; second, because French society, with its Jacobin culture, still takes a negative view of the use of threats in the defense of "partial interests." In any case, what exactly would the threat involve, and how efficacious would it be? As Rabi notes,

> The Jewish vote can perhaps influence the result in a district where the outcome is doubtful. But what is the weight of 250,000 Jewish voters in relation to the mass of 20 million voters in France? Of course, it is not only a matter of numbers; there is also the dynamism and impetus of a minority that can attract those who are hesitant or undecided. But this does not change the fact that in an electoral system, one vote is only one vote.

The difficulty of concretely influencing the electoral results (and the unviability of such threats) arises as well from the French system of elections to the National Assembly: it is a system with two ballots based on a division of the country into electoral districts. This system is not very favorable to the exercise of a Jewish "threat": the Jews are concentrated in the large and medium-sized cities; they are absent, despite the dispersion of the Algerian repatriates, from the French countryside. Thus the situation which is the source of the agricultural lobby's strength is precisely the weakness of the Jewish community. The impact of the Jewish vote can, however, be significant in municipal elections. Those of March 1977 were possibly an example of this.

Finally, there remain public threats: public demonstrations and mass meetings. In fact, experience has shown that the community can be mobilized for such demonstrations only in times of acute crisis: in 1967 and in 1973. The demonstrations in support of Soviet Jewry attract a much smaller number of participants than in Great Britain, for example. The only exception, which perhaps heralds a new type of public demonstration, was the mustering of more than 100,000 people, including many non-Jews, for the "Twelve Hours for Israel" organized in Paris in 1976. But this type of short-lived demonstration does not, properly speaking, constitute a threat.

Ilan Greilsammer