Are French Jews challenging their contract with Napoleon?

“All rights to Jews as citizens, no rights to Judaism as a nation” was the basic modus vivendi of French Jewry from the time of the French revolution. “Laicite” was the main principal and it meant a secular society, a total separation of Church and State. “Communtarism,” belonging to a community, was considered a dirty word. For a Jewish community, dating back to Roman times that was able to grow and prosper, adhering to the notion of full integration into French society was crucial. World War II shattered that ideal and shook the Jewish community. Following the war, the Jewish Federation of France (FSJU) was established- the first institution to include the word “Jewish” in its title. Then came large waves of immigration from North Africa, absorbing Jews who used to live in cohesive communities and were more traditional and observant. They had to adapt to the general model and therefore developed their own interpretations. For example, they included (Orthodox) synagogues in state sponsored Jewish Cultural/Community Centers. A phenomenon that is quite unique in the world. At the same time, their Cultural/Community Centers are open to the general public and attracting the non Jewish population is of high priority.

Are recent trends in France challenging this model?

We arrive at the Jewish Community of Boulogne, a suburb of Paris. A vibrant and growing community that began as Ashkenazi, later absorbed Sephardic Jews and is now all inclusive. The Jewish school is bursting to the seams and offers a full day K-12 formal Jewish education. The synagogues are full. The Jewish Community Center is
active and looking into a large scale building campaign to address the growing needs. Robert Ajnes, the dynamic president of the community, explains that while he and his peers went to public schools, their children are attending Jewish schools. A record number of 30,000 children are now enrolled in Jewish schools throughout France and the demand is growing. So what has changed? France has always welcomed foreigners into its midst- except for the four years of the Vichy regime- but probably did not expect a 10 million Muslim minority that is threatening the fabric of its society. Coupled with economic problems, EU uncertainties and some social unrest, the Jewish community is thus turning inwards.

Travelling out of Paris to small communities in the South of France, it seems that their peaceful atmosphere is not interrupted. As a side visit to the main purpose of our study visit, we unravel an unknown period in Jewish history; that of the “Jews of the Pope.” Back in the 14th and 15th centuries Jews were protected from the belligerent surrounding French kingdom, which expelled them under threat of forced conversion. This region was home to seven popes and two antipopes who feared assassination back in Rome. The Jews, were seen as homeless wanderers who had not recognized Christ as the messiah and had to be preserved as witnesses. Jews were restricted to narrow streets called “carriers”, what was later known as ghettos, and had to wear yellow badges on their hats. We visit Carpentras, home to the oldest still-functioning synagogue in France, dating from 1367, when one-fifth of the 2,500 inhabitants were Jews and the town was called La Petite Jerusalem.

Later that evening in Aix-En-Provence we meet with local leaders from the region who are devoted to preserve Jewish life in their small communities. Their challenge is survival. Jewish life is not taken for granted and every event or activity needs the support of all the
members. We hear about a new initiative to open a Conservative Synagogue and we meet parents who moved to the larger city of Marseilles in order to give their children formal Jewish education. It is apparent that in the smaller communities integration with the larger society is natural, their lives intertwined.

As French Jews are struggling with global trends of assimilation and globalization and local trends of challenging the old models of community existence, it is still the largest Jewish community in Europe with close to 500,000 Jews. A community where Israel is a central dimension of one’s identity and the personal and communal ties to Israel are as strong as ever. For Jo Amar, the director of the Cultural and JCC Department of FSJU the future goals are clear. Jo would like to see the Jewish Community Centers in France focus more on community building and Jewish education. He would like to see culture as a vehicle that can open doors to the general society but also strengthen Jewish identity.

Concluding our visit, Jacques Benichou, the new Executive Director of FSJU, proclaims that “Jewish Community Centers will be of highest priority during the next five years and a major vehicle to strengthen the Jewish community.” Jacques believes that today's global village requires stronger ties with Jewish communities around the world and looks forward to building more common bridges. Therefore, the challenge for world Jewry is to communicate and collaborate in a manner that will resonate with French Jewry and will address their current state of mind.

Smadar Bar-Akiva, Executive Director, World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers (WCJCC) - an umbrella organization representing more than 1,100 JCCs worldwide. WCJCC recently led a study seminar to France.