CHAPTER FOUR

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS ON THE JEWS OF FRANCE AT THE TURN OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

The Jewish population of France is experiencing a major transformation; yet another chapter of change in their long, rich and sometimes difficult history. Studying the French Jewish community at this juncture in its history and witnessing the changes firsthand is fascinating and exciting. In this book I have endeavored to draw a picture of the “Jewish fact” in France at the turn of the millennia, based on empirical studies analyzed within the historical, political, philosophical and cultural context. At the same time, it may be acknowledged that the observation of Jewish reality is not neutral, particularly if the observer is Jewish. As a researcher, I also understand the culture from within, having been raised in a Jewish family in France and educated in the public school system through university. Since making Aliyah in 1973, I have closely observed the situation in France and its Jewish community with both professional and personal interest. The issues explored in this book are of primary concern not only to French Jews, but by extension to both Jewish world at large and to Europe. They relate to the large projects of nation-building and integration, and the development of personal and social identities within a rapidly changing socio-political environment. To speak of Jewish identity is to speak of social production and individuality in respect to social structures, and to say, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, that “habitus is socialized subjectivity”.¹

The principle of the existence of the Jews of France is based upon socialized subjectivity. Shmuel Trigano, in L’avenir des Juifs de France [The future of the Jews of France], describes it as a double impasse: “On the one hand not to leave citizenship or disassociate oneself from the

¹ Bourdieu (1992: 101). Bourdieu (1971: 183) defined ‘habitus’ as: “A system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems.”
nation; on the other hand not to take advantage of the representation of the Jews committed to a communal life.” For Trigano, if one of the terms in this equation changes, the entire existence of French Jews is put into question. Socio-political analyses sometimes envisage catastrophic scenarios. The approach of this book seeks to be different and considers that irrespective of changes in the socio-political environment in which individuals develop, they remain subject to the rules of social logic.

1. Jews and Israélites

One of the most profound and at the same time perplexing findings concerns the shifting uses and understandings of the terms “Jew” and “Israélite”. The complexity of the issue became apparent to me when I prepared to give a short lecture on use of the two terms; I realized that it was almost impossible to explain current use of the terms based on prior definitions. Someone employing the term “Israélite” is no longer necessarily a non-religious, assimilated Jew, and the “Jew” is no longer the subject and object of an institutional “communitarianism”.

After great consideration, I would advance a theory that those who identify as “Jew” (an increasing proportion of the population) correspond to the type which once was called “Israélite”, an assimilated Judaism focused on the general society, while those actively practicing a Jewish life built around religious and cultural traditions employ a dual definition of “Jew and Israélite”. Does use of the dual term “Jew and Israélite” represent adoption of a strategy of double identification representing the fundamental principle so dear to the Count de Clermont-Tonnerre, limiting the Jew to the private sphere while placing the Israélite in the public domain? If so, it may be that those using both terms call themselves “Jew” within their community and “Israélite” to the outside.

The generally accepted meanings and definitions do not explain the complexity of the social phenomena. If the two terms are opposed to each other, the duality does not leave much room for nuances. The term Israélite would be the expression of the Judaism of the Consistory, born in the 19th century, a faith practiced at the individual level,

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