CHAPTER 9

“The French Jewish Community Speaks to You with One Voice”: Dissent and the Shaping of French Jewish Politics since World War II

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Introduction

In December 1961, the influential Tunisian-born French Jewish writer and thinker Albert Memmi penned an article in the Algerian Jewish newspaper Information juive, in which he heavily critiqued what he deemed the lack of “Jewish politics” in France. He exclaimed:

One certainly encounters numerous Jews in political circles, but a Jewish presence in the political life of the country does not exist, practically speaking. Numerous Jews try to act, even do act politically, but almost never as Jews.1

In particular, he sharply criticized, even mocked the attempts of some to fight antisemitism “as Frenchmen”; rather, he contended, one should openly recognize the particular danger for Jews, while still acknowledging the commonalities in all forms of racism.

It is difficult to imagine a major French Jewish commentator offering such a critique today. Indeed, organized French Jewry’s response in the early twenty-first century to both a marked rise in antisemitism and periodic violence in the Middle East has been publicly, robustly, even emphatically Jewish. Moreover, not only have French Jewish community institutions long become comfortable speaking publicly for Jews qua Jews; they generally have done so in an insistently unified and uniform manner. Equally notable is that, by the late twentieth century, such public speech on behalf of French Jewry was often highly critical of the French government and its policies in a manner unprecedented in prior generations. If in 1961, the community consensus was not to

speak politically as Jews, within a generation, that consensus had transformed into one about how precisely to speak as Jews.\(^2\)

Though such a sea change demands explanation, few scholars have posed the question. While historians have begun to examine Jewish politics in France in the post-1945 period, they have generally focused on a particular moment or strand, rather than tracing shifts over time or looking at various competing currents. By emphasizing a long-term, multi-vocal perspective, this chapter begins to show how a range of Jewish political engagements both came together to create and institutionalize a more assertive, public and particularistic French Jewish politics and periodically contested the direction of that politics.\(^3\) We trace this evolution in French Jewish politics since the Second World War through a pair of case studies. The first comes from the last years of the French-Algerian War, the very moment when Memmi wrote. In fact, contrary to his critique, a number of French Jews—particularly those who had come of age

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\(^2\) Jews in France have of course been ‘politically’ pursuing Jewish interests for generations, ranging from the Napoleonic Grand Sanhedrin to the support of specifically Jewish causes by French Socialist Party leader Léon Blum. The shift we want to underscore is one toward a far greater willingness not to be political but to articulate publicly a Jewish group politics that distinguishes ‘Jewish’ values, interests, or obligations from those of France more broadly.