

From Heterogeneity To Consensus: The Jewish Community Of Montreal*

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Résumé

À travers le monde et en diaspora, les Juifs ont toujours eu tendance à se regrouper d'après leurs affinités géographiques. Cette hétérogénéité particulièrement évidente dans le cas de Montréal, est développée par l'auteur de cet article: J. Bauer.

La communauté Juive de Montréal intéresse car les pôles d'intérêt varient avec les différentes vagues de Juifs venus d'un peu partout: Des survivants de l'Holocauste à l'immigration des sépharades en 1967, date et vague importantes de Juifs francophones sépharades.

De plus, M. Bauer envisage les différentes "langues" ou "dialectes" qui sont à la source même de la différenciation entre groupes de Juifs en un mot: la communication verbale.

Sur la scène politique, les Juifs à Montréal ont, bien qu'ayant leurs opinions personnelles, opté pour la tendance libérale qui en fait est plus une tradition qu'une tendance.

On peut déjà voir, ne fut-ce que par ces quelques points, jusqu'à quel degré une communauté forte d'environ 100,000 membres témoigne d'une profonde diversité. Au plus fort du débat M. Bauer définit les 3 éléments qui, s'ils sont rejetés par certains, font que ces personnes s'excluent de la communauté juive. Puis, M. Bauer procède à une réflexion sur l'état et la situation des différents groupes de Juifs les distinguant selon leurs affinités.

S'inspirant de la définition de Renan, M. J. Bauer poursuit son raisonnement sur la nation juive, notion et réalité qui se retrouvent dans la communauté Juive de Montréal.

Un des points qui tient à coeur M. J. Bauer est l'idée de la centralité des liens entre le peuple Juif et Israël, plus précisément Jérusalem. M. Bauer

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nous en donne une description détaillée et pertinente.

Après une ébauche sérieuse des mouvements et les groupes divers, ébauche comparée à celle des U.S.A., on en arrive au fait qu'en dépit des différences distinguant les groupes entre eux ce qui prévaut, est une unanimité fondamentale de la part des Juifs de Montréal envers l'Etat Juif l'essor du Judaïsme et la centralité d'Israel. Puis M. Bauer nous sert une analyse du folklore, de l'art populaire, des us et coutumes propres à une minorité juive au sein de la minorité.

Les racines de la communauté Juive de Montréal sont diverses. Une dichotomie identique à celle des yiddichisants se retrouve chez les Sépharades. M. Bauer nous en fait une analyse valable. Enfin et pour conclure, M. Bauer déclare que l'existence de ces groupes différents sont un défi à la communauté Juive de Montréal, laquelle se doit de trouver un moyen de respecter les us et coutumes des différents groupes sans pour autant avoir à faire le sacrifice d'une cohésion fondamentale et propre à une communauté Juive palpitante.

In their various diasporas, Jews have had a tendency to group themselves according to their geographic origins, be they countries, provinces, towns or hamlets. This trend manifests itself particularly in the creation of various synagogues in order to allow people from the same geographic area to congregate.

This heterogeneity is particularly obvious in Montreal.¹ The community is composed of different strata: a tiny one of old settlers who came to Montreal in the last part of the eighteenth century, a massive one of Eastern European Jews who began to arrive in the 1880's, and a number of North-African Jews who came in the 1960's and 1970's. The very different roots of the Montreal Jewish community have given way to at least six different cleavages affecting contemporary conditions.

First, the interests of various groups within the community differ according to the date of their arrival in Canada; it is not only a matter of background or tradition. The mere fact that a component of the community has been part of that community for a shorter or longer period produces various outlooks on a given situation, different expectations, different levels within the organized structures of the community, and different levels of integration and even assimilation within the broader society. The survivors of the Holocaust, who arrived in the 1950's, are one of the last groups to come to Montreal with specific characteristics. The

often cited Ashkenaz-Sepharad dichotomy is both true and oversimplified. Ashkenazim are themselves divided between sub-groups: Poles, Lithuanians, Romanians, Hungarians, Russians, etc. Sephardim come from different countries: Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and so on. This oversimplification is apparent in the Communauté Sepharade du Québec; despite its name, most members are from Morocco, other Sephardim being hardly represented.

The third source of differentiation is language. Some speak Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and other languages, not to mention English and French. Religiosity is another manifestation of heterogeneity. We find not only religious, non-religious and anti-religious groups, but amongst the religious group alone a myriad of sub-sub-groups appears: orthodox, both Mitnagdim and Hassidim with their various dynasties, conservative, liberal and a few other smaller groupings. On the political scene, Jews are to be found everywhere in the spectrum, from right to the far left, but most Jews, as do a majority of members of other minority groups in Quebec, tend to vote Liberal. Even regarding Zionism, one can choose between numerous branches: Labour, Revisionist, Religious, Leftist, and more.

Such an enumeration for a community of an estimated 100,000 persons shows its amazing diversity. This diversity is not surprising. If we take into account the very different roots, it is unavoidable that the community should be a most complex one and that it appears not only diversified but even divided. A more intensive study reveals a consensus on certain fundamental points, not perhaps as to means, but certainly as to goals. This broad consensus is strong enough to let us posit that those who reject the following three points are excluding themselves from the Jewish community: existence of a Jewish nation, its continuing development, and the centrality of Israel.

Existence of a Jewish nation seems obvious but is hard to define. It is obvious because a nation which does not believe in its own existence would not survive for any length of time. Nevertheless, we find in Montreal, as in other parts of the world, Jews who not only deny their own existence but try to have this idea recognized by the society at large. These Jews may be divided into three groups: those who wish to disappear as Jews want everyone to believe that there is no Jewish nation; those who, in the name of internationalism want the Jewish people to be the first to disintegrate; and those who, following traditional Marxist ideology, see in the Jewish people a "class-people", artificial and without future. The first sub-group

is not to be found within the Jewish community for obvious reasons; the second one is on the verge of extinction with the rise of the State of Israel and the last one specializes in attacking both Israel and the Montreal Jewish community in the columns of the French media.² Except for these three segments, the whole Jewish population, organized or not, believes in Jewish peoplehood.

The Jewish people has existed without state or quasi-state structures for centuries; the relationship between nation and religion is especially complex. With or without some ingredients, Jewish nationhood corresponds to Renan's definition: a human group with common roots, a shared past and wanting a common present and a common future. With this definition, there is hardly any opposition within the Jewish community of Montreal.

The affirmation of Jewish nationhood introduces the notions of the survival, enhancement and development of this nation. Even those Jews whose actions are counterproductive to the continuation of Jewish peoplehood, by intermarriage, for instance, claim to be interested in the development of the Jewish people.

Those more involved present a tremendous diversity of opinion as to the means necessary to obtain the goal of development. Some insist on education, others on religion, culture, philosophy, customs, traditions. Education is the most frequently advocated method³ but there again, diversity takes over: in Montreal the choice is between private tutoring, afternoon schools and day schools. If we just consider the Montreal Jewish day school system, it is composed of institutions following very different lines: ultraorthodox, various Hassidic groups, modern orthodox, orthodox-zionist, moderately religious, conservative, sepharad, yiddishist.⁴ Each one, in its own way, pursues the same goal: the development of the Jewish people.

The third basic point is the centrality of the links between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, Jerusalem in particular. The links are with the land and not the State, since for nearly nineteen centuries there was no Jewish State. The links with Jerusalem are not a recent political invention: every single event in Jewish life, without exception, is related to Jerusalem: from the daily prayers to the festivals, from weddings to funerals. A way has been found to relate even Purim, the only festival which commemorates an event without connection to Jerusalem, to the Holy City.⁵

The centrality of this link does not prevent very different interpretations as to what would constitute the best policy for the government of Israel,

but the consensus is on the goal: the link between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel passes today through the State of Israel.

The special status of Israel is due to two reasons: first, the unity of the Jewish people around the very place of its roots and around a place as old as the people itself, and secondly, Israel as the symbol of the Jewish people. During the Middle Ages the Talmud was burned in public (e.g. place de Grèves in Paris, 1242), today the State of Israel is under attack in public forums.

We said earlier that Jews who did not share the consensus on Jewish nationhood, Jewish development and the centrality of Israel were excluding themselves from the Jewish community. This is the case with various Jewish movements which, since the eighteenth century, have rejected these notions. They have disappeared; their descendants are not Jewish anymore. These kinds of movements are not prominent on the Montreal scene. Even the Reform synagogues who rejected the two notions in their Pittsburgh Platform (1885), amended it in 1937 (Columbus Platform) and are now organizing a Zionist Reform Movement. The Reform synagogues of Montreal, always a small minority in the overall Jewish community, follow the lead from their sister organizations in the United States. Among the ultra-orthodox a few recognize the two first points: Jewish peoplehood and Jewish development, but do not recognize Israel on religious grounds, Israel not being the Messianic state. They have been marginalized to a point where they are no more than a minute minority, without influence. In Israel and the United States they are vocal enough; in Montreal they are so few that they don't represent a significant aspect of the Jewish community.⁶ But even these fringe groups, opposed to the State of Israel, believe in the centrality and the sanctity of the Land of Israel.

The basic consensus on Jewish nationhood, Jewish development and centrality of Israel is then shared not only by the organized Montreal Jewish community and every component of it, but also by the vast majority of the Jewish population, even the non-organized and non-affiliated individuals. A manifestation of this consensus is the success of the annual March to Jerusalem with its 17,000 registered participants⁷ and the thousands of unregistered ones. The very name of the march, its purpose (to raise money for Jewish and Israeli social causes), and the diversity of its participants converge in giving to Montreal Jews a chance to publicly display the fact that despite their heterogeneous backgrounds and experiences, they feel united.

The diversity of means creates gaps inside the community. How wide can these gaps be without hurting the unity cemented by the basic consensus on goals. It is at this point that we shall refer to the notion of folklore. In its primary sense, folklore means popular traditions, customs and art. Obviously, there is not one single Jewish folklore but many. Consider only the various folklore related to weddings. In its secondary sense, folklore means picturesque, quaint. It is a nice but irrelevant touch to the generally recognized and officialized traditions, customs and art. This distinction faces every minority group.

A minority group is always in a quandry when it is divided into many sub-groups. Either each sub-group decides to keep to the fullest extent its own traditions or it decides to agree on a common denominator and thus to minimize, or even to forget, the specific traits which make it a minority within the minority.

It seems to us that when facing this agonizing choice, minority groups should be aware that they need a "critical mass" in order to survive. A critical mass is the minimum number of people needed to maintain a living community, less than which the group is faced with progressive extinction. The need of a critical mass is already recognized by the Jewish tradition of the *Minyan*, the minimum number of ten men necessary for public prayer. Under that number, we don't have a Jewish community but merely individual Jews. The critical mass changes with times, locations and problems. If ten men are necessary and sufficient to have a *minyan*, they are not strong enough to have functioning Jewish institutions. The availability of Kosher meat is an example of the relativity of the critical mass. In pre-industrial times, a relatively limited number of Jewish families could afford to retain the services of a *shohet*. With mass production, the establishment of a few slaughter houses instead of the previously unlimited number of small ones, new modes of commercialisation, a Jewish community which despite its small size could afford a *shehita* service, cannot afford it any more.⁸ The same is true for Jewish schools. The mere idea of a school for a few tens of children is frowned upon as irrelevant. Social, cultural and other services, follow the same pattern. Only the large centres, with a critical mass much higher than previously considered necessary, are able to give their members the services they request. The smaller communities cannot manage any more on their own and have to rely, at least for certain kinds of services, on the large centre. A similar trend is discernable among the bigger communities: their various components have to share the most costly services such as the social ones. This is

what happened in all Jewish communities, including Montreal, where there is a kind of federation of social services for the whole community and not just for segments of it.⁹ These federations cannot but stress the common denominator and put far behind the folklore of each sub-group.

Nevertheless quite a few sub-groups see themselves as the totality of the minority groups. Their specific needs are claimed to be universal. Their folklore is presented as crucial. Amongst these sub-groups, we find in Montreal self-proclaimed yiddishists and Sephardim.¹⁰ They stress the particular, they forget the bases.

Yiddish is seen as *the* answer to all the needs of the Jewish community: Yiddish in itself as opposed to Hebrew, Yiddish as literature opposed to Jewish religion, to Jewish unity, to the centrality of Israel. For others Sephardi traditions are more worthwhile than plain Jewish ones: Maimonides becomes a Sephardi with perhaps a Jewish background, the *Mimouna* ceremony more important than Passover. We do not want to dismiss any of these traditions and customs; we just want to stress the danger of a policy which forgets the core upon which are based these traditions. We suspect that those who, regardless of their number, choose to put the emphasis on folklore, in the primary sense, are doing a *fuite en avant*. The more emphasis one puts on folklore in itself, the less one puts on the broader minority group and the less chance one has to survive in the general society.

Folklore in the broad sense is a living culture. When the sub-group does not obtain the critical mass to sustain its own culture and refuses to merge with other sub-groups of the same population, folklore becomes picturesque and quaint, a dead body, the remnant of the past and not the path to the future. Folklore then becomes an excuse: I am disappearing as a Jew but I make myself believe that my emphasis on folklore will save me.

The roots of the Montreal Jewish community are diversified but, confronted with a Western society which has a tendency to bulldoze every particularism, the future cannot accommodate every specification coming from the past. Even the Canadian policy on multiculturalism cannot help a group which would not survive on its own and is geared towards integration of groups.¹² This was understood when the Montreal Jewish community was a tiny one. More than a century ago, until 1858, German Jews were members of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and later English, German and Polish Jews merged into the Shaar Hashomayim.¹³ The Jewish community was so small in numbers at that time that it would have been impossible to sustain five, six or seven different synagogues.

The Jews, then, put the emphasis on the basics, not on folklore. Later, the Jewish Public Library went through different stages, from a sub-group service to one serving the whole community. Founders of the Jewish Public Library wanted to give the waves of Yiddish speaking immigrants access to their own culture. Such a service was not needed by the first settlers who spoke English. Today the J.P.L. has books in Yiddish, Hebrew and more and more in English and French. No other sub-group of the Jewish community would dare organize a new library. Even if the J.P.L. still insists on its Yiddish aspect, it is open to the whole spectrum of the Jewish population, whatever their language. The same kind of dichotomy is discernable among the Sephardim. Relationship between the general Jewish community agencies and the Communauté Sepharade are not always perfect.¹⁴ Whenever the Moroccan Jews have a critical mass of their own, they organize different structures such as synagogues and schools.¹⁵ As soon as the critical mass is elusive, they work closer to or inside the already existing framework of services: social aid, sports facilities, kashrut, etc. Is it a coincidence if those opposed to a common denominator seem to be unaware of or uninterested in the inter-faith marriages, are more inclined to attack Israel publicly, are more folklore-minded and less Jewish peoplehood oriented?¹⁶ The ritual aspect of Jewish life appears to be more easily organized. Every sub-group, however tiny, with a certain cohesion, may and frequently does have its own local customs for prayer: Hassidic groups, Hungarians, for instance, follow this pattern.¹⁷ For socializing, sub-groups establish structures within the general framework (for instance Galician and Hungarian chapters of many organisations) or try to attract sub-groups too small by themselves to have such a chapter (for instance, the Club de l'Age d'Or with its Moroccan and other Sephardi French-speaking members). For education, the core of any living culture, many sub-groups had to unify their effort: Yiddish secularists, Moroccans, Lubavitch, are strong enough to have their own schools; most of the other sub-groups, including the closely differentiated groups of Hassidim, have managed to organize schools palatable to a few sub-groups.¹⁸ For social services, nearly all sub-groups participate in the community-wide network because maintaining or creating such services on a sub-group basis would be impractical.

Throughout the ages, sub-groups within the Jewish people have maintained their own traditions, liturgy, etc. Because there was hardly an escape from the Jewish community — except through abjuration — , Jews could afford the luxury of perpetuating various folklores. Today, even in

big centres, the pressure of society is such that the choice is more and more between erosion of the Jewish community and unification of its various components. Unification does not mean that limited folklore should disappear but that this kind of folklore is secondary to the Jewish folklore at large. Every time the critical mass is attained, it is to be expected that sub-groups will organize their own structures. In those areas where the critical mass is not attained, a separate structure is tantamount to suicide. It is quite remarkable that the history of Montreal Jewish community is a testimony to this understanding by the various sub-groups of what is essential and what is mere folklore. At the same time Montreal has many autonomous congregations but a unified "Vaad Ha'ir"¹⁹, a lot of different Jewish Day Schools competing with each other but a Montreal Jewish Day Schools Association for basic issues relating to all schools. A growing number of manifestations are difficult to relate to a single sub-group but have their source either in the community at large or, at least, in a few sub-groups. It is sometimes amazing to watch people belonging to apparently disparate groups working together towards the same goal, especially in social services and in aid to Israel.²⁰ It is no less amazing to find how often legitimate diversity of opinion or interest is being exaggerated by people whose aim is not the benefit of the Jewish people. Various agencies of governments and public organizations show a better knowledge of the situation than we might expect. Is it just by chance that the Quebec government attaches so much importance to the differences between the Ashkenazim (the "Anglos") and the Sephardim (the "French")?²¹ Is it just to inform the population that any sub-group or individual critical of Israel on whatever account is given immediate publicity by most media? Is it a mere coincidence if Yiddish and Sephardi revitalism, as long as it is folklore not related to basic issues, are so welcomed by many a group not known for any special sympathy towards the Jewish people and spurned if they are part of Jewish tradition?²² The sub-groups have to be aware of how much they can insist on their points of view without endangering their own survival and that of the Jewish community as a whole.

The existence of these various branches challenges the Montreal Jewish community to find a way to respect different traditions and customs without sacrificing the cohesiveness basic to a living Jewish community.

NOTES

1. For example "20 ans après", a National Film Board movie by Jacques Bensimon, presents the Montreal Moroccan Sephardi Community as not only different from but com-

- pletely alienated by the English speaking Ashkenazi community.
2. Such as the President of the Conseil Québécois de la Paix who specializes in attacking Israel and who even managed, in an article against the Boat People, to first blast Israel (*Le Devoir*).
 3. Leaders of the Montreal Jewish community turned down in the 1930's the opportunity to establish a public Jewish School Board of Montreal along the lines of the Catholic and the Protestant School Boards.
 4. Amongst the various Jewish Day Schools in Montreal are to be found United Talmud Torah, Jewish People and Peretz Schools, Solomon Schechter Academy, Yeshiva Gedolah, Beth Rivkah, Beth Yaacov, Hebrew Academy, Rabbinical College (Lubavitch), United Orthodox Schools (Hassidic), École Sepharad, École Maïmonide, Hebrew Foundation School, Akiva School. . .
 5. Cf laws from the Shulhan Aruch concerning the date of celebration of Purim in Jerusalem.
 6. See our paper "La signification religieuse de l'Éthas d'Israël pour les Juifs" to be published in *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches en Sociologie Religieuse* (Laval University).
 7. In 1980.
 8. Such is the case of the small Quebec City Jewish community which, for a time, had a kosher meat market. Today the only kosher products available in Quebec City are those sold to the general public (hot dogs, salamis, etc.).
 9. Allied Jewish Community Services.
 10. These "Yiddishists" and "Sephardim" are often on the border lines of their respective sub-groups and push towards a break between their groups and the overall Jewish community. They may be found on campuses, mostly McGill and University of Montreal.
 11. *Mimouna* is a festive occasion at the end of Passover: at night families assemble around a sheaf of wheat, milk and other fertility symbols.
 12. See the statement of the Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, on Multiculturalism (House of Commons, October 8, 1971): "Resources permitting, the government will seek to assist all Canadian cultural groups that had demonstrated a desire and effort to continue to develop, a capacity to grow. . ."
 13. In 1846.
 14. Cf *La Voix Sepharad* edited by Communauté Sepharade du Québec on an irregular basis.
 15. École Maïmonide and École Sepharade.
 16. Such as Jewish Faculty members who support blatantly anti-Israel organizations, or discussion leaders at Centre Hillel who advocate intermarriage in the name of their "Jewishness".
 17. In Montreal many small synagogues have merged in order to form main synagogues. The number of main synagogues has not significantly changed during the last twenty years. Recently a new phenomenon has occurred: the thriving of new small *minyanim* in synagogues' chapels, houses, apartments, locals of any kind.
 18. United Orthodox Schools is the umbrella organization for various hassidic groups (Belzer, Satmer, etc.) These very different groups, excluding the Lubavitch, maintain their own Jewish studies program but have a combined secular one.
 19. The Vaad Hafr is, amongst other duties, in charge of Kashrut in Montreal.
 20. Such as members of the ultra-orthodox population helping the cause of Yeshivat Hesder, Israeli institution of Talmudic higher studies where students combine their studies with military service, the very symbol of modern orthodox-zionist philosophy!
 21. Cf our paper presented to the Canadian Political Science Association (June 1980): "Consultation et manipulation: la consultation des minorités à Ottawa et Québec."
 22. The core of this approach, never stated so crudely, is to present Yiddish or Sephardi customs as "Jewish" and endangered by Israel who is then seen as "un-Jewish"!