

Nadia Malinovich

**No Better Home than France?**

In her contribution to *No Better Home?* Hasia Diner aptly notes that “the trope of gratitude” has been used as a survival strategy for Jews living across time, countries, and continents, well into the modern era:

Never utterly convinced that the robust opportunity structure that they enjoyed would really persist, the Jews of France, England, Australia, Canada and the United States used moments in time, anniversaries, national holidays, and meetings with state officials, among others, to proclaim their gratitude and to thank the governments and the people for having provided them with the best possible home.<sup>1</sup>

France is notably on this list, in contrast to twelfth-century Spain and early twentieth-century Germany, which Diner rather evokes as examples of “the trope of gratitude” morphing into memory of a golden age when these places became sites of Jewish expulsion and persecution. And yet, in contrast to England, Australia, Canada, and the United States, France has been a site of Jewish persecution in living memory: during the Second World War, as elsewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe, the country’s Jewish population was subject to racial laws and deportation. Why does Diner nonetheless (and rightly in my view) include France on this second list? The answer, I would argue, lies in the singular conundrum that France has posited to the question of “no better home?” stemming from the particularities of the French Jewish experience from 1789 up until today.

### **No Better Home than France? (1789–1940)**

As the first European country to have politically emancipated its Jewish population, France occupied a special place in the Jewish imagination the world over, representing hope for Jews and all humanity built on the principles of equality and religious and political freedom. The evolution of “Franco-Judaism,” an ideology synthesizing traditional Jewish religious concepts with French republican and nationalist ideals, became dominant in Jewish public discourse. Early nineteenth-century scholars such as Salomon Munk and Joseph Salvador drew parallels between the political life of ancient Israel and modern Republican ideology, thus expressing their commitment to the ideal of republican France during the years of the Restoration and the Second Empire. We also find this synthesis of French and Republican values in the language of the founders of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, an association created in 1860 to advocate for Jewish civil rights and share the blessings of (French) civilization the world over. This kind of public discourse was largely aspirational and—in keeping with Diner’s observations—intended to demonstrate French Jews’ loyalty, and by extension, ensure their security. And yet, there were discernable differences in the possibilities for Jewish social advancement and acceptance that set France apart, particularly after the founding of the Third Republic in 1870. Structural barriers to the liberal professions and governmental positions were largely absent, and

social intercourse between Jews and non-Jews became increasingly normative, particularly as compared to the situation in Germany.

In contemporary renditions of the rise of modern antisemitism, the Dreyfus Affair looms large as the moment when a vicious underbelly of antisemitism brought the limits of Jewish belonging to France starkly to the fore. Importantly, however, while the Affair did indeed shake the French Jewish community to its core, for most Jews, its ultimate resolution in favor of the Dreyfusards confirmed their faith in the republic and attachment to France. Reactions to the Affair around the Jewish world are also indicative of the relatively exalted place that the country continued to occupy in the Jewish international imaginary. Indeed, somewhat ironically, the fact that the entire incident revolved around a Jewish army officer—a status notably unattainable in either Tsarist Russia or in Germany—served as evidence of the overall favored status of French Jews. It is also noteworthy that French Jews did not experience the same kind of social exclusion and prejudice in the realms of employment and education as their American counterparts in the aftermath of the First World War. The 1920s were rather a time in which the dominant ethos among French Jews was optimistic. Antisemitism appeared to be subsiding, and Jewish participation in the war helped to popularize the notion that Jews were no less French for proudly affirming their unique spiritual and cultural heritage.

### **The End of the French Dream?**

It goes without saying that the murder of 25 percent of France's Jewish population in Nazi death camps, the pillaging of property, family separation, and other unimaginable hardships for those who survived the war marked a turning point in the history of the Jews in modern France. Importantly, however, a re-evaluation of France's status as a "Jewish home" in light of the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust did not happen overnight. The 1950s and 1960s were transitional decades. French Jews struggled to come to terms on a spiritual, moral, and intellectual level with what had taken place in Europe and in France during the war, while meeting the challenges of community rebuilding and renewal. It was during these years that Jews from the Middle East and North Africa began to arrive in large numbers. Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jews of French colonial North Africa increasingly came to identify with French culture, and—especially among the more educated—to see France as their spiritual home. For these new arrivals, who had not suffered persecution to the same degree as their European counterparts during the war years, an idealized image of France as a Jewish home remained largely intact.

Beginning in the 1970s, a reckoning with Vichy's complicity in Jewish persecution and the souring of relations between France and Israel, together with broader changes in the post-1968 social and cultural landscape led to the emergence of a

more assertive and identarian French Jewish posture. The turn of the twenty-first century marked another turning point, as a wave of anti-Jewish violence and rhetoric gripped the country following the Second Intifada. Over the past two decades, discussion of Jewish life in France has largely centered on the question of antisemitism, a spike in departures for Israel and elsewhere (including, notably, Montreal) and the possibilities for a French Jewish future. This kind of widely circulating media-fed discourse can obscure the reality on the ground. Jews occupy a wide stratum of positions in contemporary French culture, politics, and economic life, and Jewish cultural and religious expression of all kinds are a feature of contemporary French society. Furthermore, France has retained its status as the country with the largest Jewish population in Europe and third largest Jewish population in the world. As has been the case for more than two centuries, France thus continues to function as a Jewish home, and one that most French Jews still choose to make their own.

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## 1

Hasia Diner, “Destination World Jewry: The United States Versus the World,” in *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, ed. David S. Koffman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 35.