

Are There Jewish Answers to Europe's Questions?

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The title of this conference is deliberately provocative. We all know about Europe's historical "Jewish Question", and how according to most world Jews it was "solved" through the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. The idea that there might be Jewish "answers" to Europe's questions today therefore seems plainly counter-intuitive. Most Jews, if asked, would probably agree with one President of a European Jewish community who asserted that "Europe needs Jews more than Jews need Europe." Perhaps even more so now when the postwar European ideal has just been thrown into disarray by the combined French and Dutch votes against the European Constitution. So Jewish "answers" for what and for whom?

My own reflections are based on the following tenets. First, the ongoing presence and even growing dynamism of Jewish life across Europe offers 'answers' that well transcend Europe's Jewish communities. Europe's interactions with its Jews and Jewish interactions with Europe have direct implications both for Israel's and Europe's own futures. At stake is a new understanding of multiple identities and minority rights but within a context of universal values and a search for the common good. On this count Jews in Europe and Jews in Israel are mirror images of each other and both stand to profit from a deeper confrontation with the European context.

The European, Jewish and Israeli triangle has undergone many permutations in the last decade. For most of the 1990's, Europe was coalescing into a cohesive political and economic entity at a time when Israel itself seemed to be on the path to peace through the Oslo accords. The question back then was whether there would be a viable Jewish life across Europe or whether the fall of the Berlin Wall had merely reunited two anemic Jewish halves, the Western part disappearing through assimilation and indifference, the eastern part now fully visible in its post-Holocaust and Communist amputations. The onset of the Second Intifada in 2000, followed by spate of antisemitic attacks across Europe, particularly in France, and combined with the September 11th terrorist attacks and the divisions in the Western camp over the Iraq war altered the very shape of the triangle. All of a sudden, for many Jews around the world, "Europe" was indeed consolidating but in the wrong direction, against its own Jews and against a besieged Israel, in a combined antisemitic and anti-Zionist stand, if not

of its political elites, at least of significant portions of its populations. In this reading Europe's Jews were rapidly turning once again into the continent's victims, just as Israel was becoming the "Jew among nations."

The European, Jewish, Israeli triangle has taken yet another turn in the last few months. With the demise of Arafat and the presence of a more moderate Palestinian leadership, Israel is less besieged and once again able to take its own political initiatives. Europe's Jews have also overcome the profound pessimism of the last five years to take on a more active role, particularly in the fight against antisemitism at a European level. In doing so, they have asserted their own collective voice, amplified by the very presence of a Jewish imprint in every country's politics and life. Now instead, it is Europe's turn to enter into crisis. It seems to be losing its identity, limits, and political project. Europe's problems are no longer to be found, as in the 1990's, on the continent's outer fringes, in the Balkans with the war in Yugoslavia. Today, the pessimism has touched Europe's inner core inside France and Germany. So that paradoxically we can say, that compared to the 1990's, Europe's Jewish communities are increasingly coming together with a far more visible European presence precisely at the time when Europe seems to be unraveling. Should Europe's Jews throw their arms up in despair over the continent and simply follow their own Jewish community interests in tandem with the particular needs of the Jewish world?

I argue for the very opposite. Precisely because of Europe's own internal crisis, it is important for Jews across Europe to stand up for values and interests that transcend their own particular concerns. They should strengthen the kind of societies that allow them to be fully Jews as well as citizens of their respective countries. These societies do exist throughout Europe now and it is only fair that one take stock of the positive aspects of the last two decades of Jewish interaction with Europe.

The contemporary Jewish situation

These positive aspects begin with a paradox. Namely that Jews have always considered themselves to be a minority. They are of course a minority in numerical terms, but it is no longer clear that they are so in symbolic and effective political terms. Why? For the simple reason that the notion of 'minority' implies a clear 'majority' against which to define oneself. Jews in the past were clearly a minority with respect to the twin pillars of European modern history: the Church and the State anchored in the universalist principles of the Enlightenment. Today neither of these pillars is strong enough to constitute a majoritarian pole. The Jewish minority thus lives in the context of an ocean of other minorities: ethnic, religious, cultural, political, nationalist, diasporic, an ocean in which even the secular camp is merely one group among others. As a result, Jewish voices carry far more weight in this democratic cacophony and European 'chaos' than they ever did in the past.

A Positive Jewish Presence

For Jewish voices to be heard, however, they must express themselves in positive Jewish terms, and not just on the two predictable fronts of the struggle against antisemitism and anti-Zionism. These two fronts must of course

be manned diligently but they cannot constitute the only theatres of a European Jewish presence. One needs to hear positive Jewish voices.

Jews play a pivotal role in Europe today. They have historically experienced many of the problems of Europe's "others" compounded of course by the Holocaust. Yet today, as in the prewar past, it would be difficult to deny that Jews "belong" by their status and success. They can hardly be considered as marginal to the societies in which they live. However, they cannot be thought of only in terms of their national identity. Contrary to the past, however, no one accused Jews of 'double loyalty' when they make their voices heard with respect to Israel or to international Jewish issues. It is precisely their multiple loyalties within a loyal citizenship that makes Jews such a paragon for Europe's non-Jews, be they 'old' Europeans, old 'others' or new immigrants. Jews offer a highly positive interface with respect to all of Europe's interlocutors, whether Christian, Muslim or lay.

A Multiple Jewish Presence

Multiple loyalties are just one positive aspect of the Jewish 'paradigm'. There are others as well. Multiple internal Jewish identities offer another positive model. There is no denying that there are now many different ways of being Jewish, ranging from the ultra-orthodox to the ultra-radical and lay with orthodox, conservative, and reform identities, and also Chabad, in between. For many communities, such divisions are perceived as an internal danger. In pluralist societies they are in reality a sign of Jewish confidence and success, and of a renewed commitment to Jewish values interpreted in function of one's deepest world views. All the more so that when needed, Jewish voices do come together as one voice not just with respect to antisemitism, but also in terms of Jewish charity and social commitments.

This Jewish multiplicity can play a positive role in Europe's own identity debates. Ideally, each type of Jew would 'pair off' (not unlike in a Noah's Ark) with his or her non-Jewish equivalents. This means that ultra-orthodox Jews would make their voices heard with their ultra-orthodox Christian and Muslim equivalents, while reform and conservative Jews would dialogue with their less stringent equivalents. Lay Jews would dialogue with their comparable 'others'. The result would be a far larger visibility of Jewish views and opinions, well beyond the role officially allotted to "State Jews", i.e., to the official representatives (both religious and lay) of Europe's Jewish communities. It is important for 'civil society' Jews to be heard as well. A chorus of Jewish voices will carry further than one official public voice. And if there are divergences, this too is part of a pluralist democracy.

The Positive Impact of a Multiple Jewish Presence

Such a pluralist Jewish presence is important on three counts: for Jewish life in Europe, for Israel, for Europe itself.

Jewish Life in Europe

It is important to break the "knee jerk" reflex many non-Jewish Europeans have that Jews only speak out 'against': against antisemitism, against anti-Zionism, against Holocaust denial, against the banalization of Jewish

specificity. Jews and their communities should find once again their ‘old’ ability to speak out ‘for’ and on behalf of causes that transcend their own collective identities, especially now that one can speak of a Jewish revival across the continent. We have reached the end of the “me-us” spiral. One should be able to hear Jewish voices in the *res publica*. Voices that dare speak about Jewish ethics and values and present them in the public space for their universal portent, voices that dare present Jewish historical and political readings of the long European past, while building cultural bridges with others.

Beyond the beautiful theory there are also practicalities. Jewish welfare services and charity have a long tradition of openness and involvement with others. Their past and present actions can be underscored and activated as a motor for community involvement and national solidarity drives. Jewish cultural and educational institutions should open up to their equivalents in other social groups, but also bring a Jewish message into the wider society. Individual actions tally up and create a magnified Jewish presence.

Israel

Israel is a highly diverse and multifaceted society. Civil Society Jews across Europe should help present the country in such an open-ended manner, so as to widen the official political ‘Israel support’ bandwagon into a more living and creative context. Israeli musical, theatre, cultural, artistic groups should be brought directly into European society, with the purpose of startling those with preset categories. The presentation of Black Jewish musicians would be a case in point so as to relativize the overused and simplistic hold of Klezmer music in the European public imagination while also showing that Jews have interacted with all sorts of populations. Conversely, thanks to Israeli classical musicians, the old Jewish tie with Europe’s grand music has prevented the ethnic musical dimension from taking over in non-Jewish imaginations. Jews across Europe could facilitate twinnings with Israeli organizations, support Israelis in European universities, and bring youths together. Jewish life in civil society is the best advocate for Israel, far away from the political and diplomatic sphere. On this count the importance of Israeli literature, film, music, and arts plays an important role in building a Jewish-Israeli dialogue inside Europe’s cultural sphere.

Furthermore, Jewish life in Europe will inevitably become the mirror image of the life on non-Jews inside a Jewish state. Whether one wants it or not, this comparison is implicitly made in Jewish circles (the best case in point being the status of reform Judaism inside Israel, and the issue of civil marriages). More important, it is also increasingly made by non-Jews. Europe’s adaptation to Jewish needs and its possible adaptation to Muslim needs is a reference which will have important repercussions for Israel’s own desire to remain both a Jewish and a democratic state but with a significant Arab minority in its own confines. What is at stake in both cases is the ability to produce an Islam and Muslim communities that learn to be numerical minorities in non-Muslim lands.

For Europe

Jewish life in Europe is developing an ever greater pan-European framework. Under the umbrella of many Jewish organizations, educational, social, artistic and cultural ties between Jewish professionals and communities are being reinforced along with the pre-existing religious ties. One can even

wonder whether Jews are not back to being the most “European” of the continent’s inhabitants. This ability to network across borders will remain trend-setting, especially in Europe’s current crisis. It can be a relevant experience for Europe’s Blacks and above all for Europe’s Muslims. The Jewish presence is therefore a paradigmatic presence for the continent as a whole. On this count the newly burgeoning Jewish-Muslim and Black-Jewish dialogues which have risen next to the more established Christian-Jewish dialogues are destined to play a key role in the construction of more harmonious democratic settings.

Suggestions for a Jewish ‘agenda’

Are there priority actions for the years ahead? The following is a non-exhaustive list

Promoting Jewish-Muslim ties.

Each type of Jew (orthodox, reform, lay) should go out and seek his or her Muslim equivalent with whom to enter into concrete alliances over common issues, and with whom to debate over core problems of identity within Europe. There is no point in pairing off a lay Jew with an orthodox Muslim, whereas orthodox Jews and Muslims can understand each other, just as their lay equivalents, or their radical reformist ones. The Jewish role is important for all Jews, regardless of their identity, acknowledge the importance of citizenship and the belonging in a wider society.

Building on the Holocaust heritage. Holocaust commemoration has transformed our pluralist democracies. They have become commemorative democracies in the process and the act of publicly acknowledging wrongs done to a specific ethnic or religious group is now perceived as the first step in a collective reconciliation. It would be wrong for Jews to act as if they already had their moment of ‘limelight’ and are no longer concerned by the continuation of the process. One must build on this precedent for the commemoration of other sufferings but above all as a way of encouraging group integration into a wider collective whose openness is precisely measured by its ability to confront all pasts. In this way, Jews can ensure that Holocaust commemoration not be perceived as a zero-sum game with no place for other sufferings. Adialectic of commemorations is the best guarantee of respect for the Jewish past.

Developing intra-Jewish transparency. Jewish collegiality beyond identity differences is crucial not only for Jewish life but also for the Muslims to look up to as an example, since these are the two religions that do not have a highly vertical structure of authority. Pluralist practice is a model for all inside and outside the community. But it can only occur if identity boxes are transparent, and not handled as black boxes inside which extremists of all stripes can monopolize the representation of minorities.

Jewish voices for the res publica. There is a crucial need to define the common values that bind groups together beyond the simple respect of their specific identities. Jews until recently were great exponents of universal values. It is important to find this strain again, one which was minimized in the last two

decades because of Jewish desire to stress Jewish suffering and pride and the defence of Israel.

Europe's future is unclear. Europe's influence in the world may continue to decline with respect to China and India. But the European continent is too emotionally laden a reference for both Jews and Israelis, too much of a living economic and social presence for their needs, and too much of an anchor with respect to two millennia of Jewish life for the Continent to simply disappear from Jewish radar screens. Nature abhors a vacuum. It is in Jewish interest, beyond daily community life, to make Jewish and Israeli voices an active part of a continent where the past is an integral part of the future, and where Jews have become an integral part of its identity.