

## **Facing Terror and Anti-Semitism in Europe. Again.**

January 16, 2015

Rabbi Barry Block

In 1895, Theodor Herzl, a Paris-based journalist, covered the Dreyfus Affair for readers of Austria's *Neue Freie Presse*. Captain Alfred Dreyfus had been falsely accused of passing military intelligence to the Germans. The Paris Herzl saw was ablaze with anti-Semitism. You see, Captain Dreyfus was Jewish, and the conspirators who framed him knew that a Jew would be an easy target. Many in France were prepared to believe that a Jew would be more loyal to other Jews – in Germany, for example – than to France. Though Alfred Dreyfus was the only Jew convicted of such a crime, thousands of French citizens took to the street, chanting, "Death to the Jews."

Herzl, though, was shocked to see such grotesque anti-Semitism in France. Two years after the French Revolution, in 1791, France had become the first nation in Europe to grant full equality to its Jewish citizens. The simple fact that a Jew could serve as an officer in the French Army was a telling statement about the level to which Jews seemed to have been accepted as French. Herzl would later say that his searing experience in France would motivate him to galvanize the World Zionist Organization.

Herzl, you see, was a thoroughly assimilated Austrian Jew, much as Dreyfus was in France. Herzl imagined, as Dreyfus likely also did, that Jews would find their ultimate redemption in modern Europe. Who could blame them for their optimism? After centuries of pogroms and expulsions, ghettos and blood libels, Jews were giddy with their new freedoms. Previously, Jews who lived in France had never dreamed of being Frenchmen; they were merely "Jews who lived in France," in their eyes and in the eyes of the world. And the same was true of Jews who lived in Germany, Austria, Britain, and elsewhere.

Devastated by the Dreyfus affair and its anti-Semitic rallies, Herzl changed his mind about where the Jewish people would find safe haven. Herzl sought a political solution to what was commonly called "the Jewish problem:" the condition of a people without a state of their own, repeatedly tormented in foreign lands. Only with a State could the Jews relate to Europeans on an equal basis.

One week ago today, the world's eyes turned to Paris once again. Two days after the horrific slaughter carried out by Islamist terrorists at the offices of the

satirical *Charlie Hebdo*, another Islamist terrorist murdered four Jews in a kosher market.

Will France's Jews respond like Captain Dreyfus? Despite being harshly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, imprisoned for five years on Devil's Island, Dreyfus returned to the service of France as a Lieutenant Colonel in World War I.

Will France's Jews respond with the thinking of Theodor Herzl? Insecure in the land of their residence, they may prefer to participate in the Zionist project, joining the thousands of French Jews who have already made their homes in Israel.

Two Prime Ministers have offered two opposing views. The Prime Minister of France, Manuel Valls, proclaimed: "*Sans les francais juifs, la France ne serait pas la France,*" "Without Jewish Frenchmen, France wouldn't be France."

And what of the other Prime Minister? French Premier Valls' bold statement was made in the context of an ill-timed exhortation of Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, who announced to France's Jews: "Israel is your home."

So, who was right? Dreyfus or Herzl? Valls or Netanyahu?

We could not be faulted for saying that Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus made a mistake by staying in France. A few years after Alfred Dreyfus died, and less than three decades after his World War I service, France capitulated to the Nazis without much of a fight. The collaborationist Vichy government efficiently handed Jews over to the Nazis for deportation and almost certain death in the Concentration Camps. Dreyfus's own granddaughter died in Auschwitz. Yes, many French fought valiantly as nationalists or partisans. A precious and righteous few were rescuers, like the nuns who hid Dreyfus's widow Lucie in a convent. Most in France, though, did what other Europeans did when the Nazis occupied: As collaborators or as bystanders, they abandoned their nation's Jews to the Nazi butchers.

Theodor Herzl died in 1904, never realizing his dream of living in a Jewish State. Even during his lifetime, though, thousands of European Jews pursued the Zionist dream. They built cities, drained swamps, and made the desert bloom. They revived the Hebrew language and captured the imagination, and sometimes the opprobrium, of the world. Still, 120 years after Herzl first articulated his vision, the people of Israel can only dream of living in peace and security. Last

week, Paris didn't seem like a safe place for Jews. Last summer, even though its existence wasn't threatened, Israel didn't feel secure.

Prime Minister Valls is much to be lauded for his efforts to make French Jews feel wanted after last week's brutal murders. His statement suggests that a nation is at its best if it is diverse. The Prime Minister's statement is bold, in the face of right-wing extremists of France's National Front, who are gaining in the polls. While the National Front's primary targets are Muslims and non-whites, its nativist view, France for the French, has spelled disaster for Jews in decades past.

The greatest challenge exposed by last week's barbarism is the growing violence of Islamist terrorists in France and throughout Europe. No, the Koran doesn't espouse violence any more than our Bible does. Yes, there were Muslim heroes in both terrorist attacks last week, notably Lissan Bathily, who valiantly risked his life to save Jews in the kosher market, and who was granted French citizenship today. And yes, plenty of moderate Muslims are speaking out against terrorism. Even Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, a moderate only by militant standards, locked arms with world leaders in this week's solidarity march.

Still, we would be foolish and dishonest if we did not acknowledge that a significant portion of the problem is the way that Islam is taught and practiced by too many Muslims in 2015. Islamist terrorism is being bred in unstable and extremist Middle Eastern countries, nurtured in European slums and prisons, and funded by Saudi Princes. Prime Minister Netanyahu is correct when he asserts that the scourge of Paris is the same one that Israel faces from Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran.

Prime Minister Valls would have been equally right to have said: "France without Muslims isn't France." Today's action, granting citizenship to Lissan Bathily, makes the point forcefully. Still, his nation will be besieged, and will indeed be without Jews, if France cannot put an end to domestic Islamist terrorism.

Enter Prime Minister Netanyahu, like a bull in a china shop. As if pushing aside other world leaders, so that he could be in the front row, were not enough, Netanyahu hit France while it was down, urging its Jews to emigrate. Already in 2014, some 7,000 French Jews moved to Israel. That number sounds larger, as it should, when I tell you that's more than one percent of France's half-million Jews, comparable to 70,000 American Jews' making *aliyah* in one year.

Israel exists because the Jewish people, like all people of the Earth, have a right to national self-determination. Israel also exists because history has taught that, without a Jewish State, the Jewish people are not safe. Israel's Law of Return, which permits any Jew to move to Israel, is at the core of the nation's being. Of course, French Jews are and ought to be welcome to move to Israel. However, taking advantage of their hour of despair, and telling them that Israel is their home, was opportunism at best, best described as bullying.

France of 2015 is not France of 1942 or Germany of 1933. Last Friday, as Muslim extremists were taking Jewish hostages, a Muslim employee of the kosher grocery store saved Jewish lives. This week, millions of French citizens, of every religion and ethnicity, marched in the largest demonstration in the nation's history, to oppose terrorism. Some held signs reading, *Je suis Juif*, "I am a Jew." A week from Sunday, when our Religious School next meets, the children of Congregation B'nai Israel will hold signs reading, *Nous sommes Juifs français*, "We are French Jews." We will send those photographs to Rabbi Tom Cohen of Kehilat Geshar in Paris, who has requested a show of support, especially for his congregation's children.

Yes, we grieve: Four of our Jewish people were murdered in cold blood for no crime other than being Jewish. They were Phillippe Braham, Yohan Cohen, Yoav Hattab, and Francois-Michel Saada.

Yes, we are angry: The world has permitted Islamist extremism to fester in its most pernicious form, terrorism.

Still, we have reason to hope: The Jews of France are not alone. They are embraced by their government. Their fellow citizens have come out in unprecedented numbers to demonstrate that they will not stand for terrorism. They have a second home, an alternative home, a Jewish State that could be their home, in Israel. They are embraced by a God who loves them.

Anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head. In Europe. Again. This time won't be the last. Still we have faith; and we pray, in words penned by Alden Solovy:

Author of life,  
Humans have turned violent,  
Crushing lives,  
Upending dreams,  
Attacking with hatred.

Source and Creator,  
Grant a perfect rest under your tabernacle of peace  
To the victims of murder in Paris  
Whose lives were cut off by violence,  
An act of witless aggression  
And calculated anti-Semitism.  
Remember the survivors of this horror.  
Grant them endurance to survive,  
Strength to rebuild,  
Faith to mourn,  
Courage to heal,  
And devotion to each other.

Heavenly Guide,  
Hand of love and shelter,  
Put an end to anger and hatred,  
Bigotry and fear,  
And lead us to a time when no one  
Suffers at the hand of another.

For the sake of our people,  
And for the sake of Your Holy Name,  
Grant the Jews of France Your protection,  
Your wholeness and healing,  
And Your peace.

Amen.