

Paris Letter: Liberal Shul Takes Root by the Seine

A Conservative Shul Battles Orthodoxies

On any Sabbath, one can enter the ground floor of a nondescript apartment building in Paris's 15th arrondissement and find it crowded with a mix of French, British and American Jews. This is the home of Paris' only Conservative (Masorti) congregation — one of two in France (the other is in Nice). In a Jewish community dominated by an increasingly Orthodox rabbinate, Congregation Adath Shalom is in the vanguard of a new kind of French revolution.

Founded in 1988 by 12 families from the Reform (*Liberale* in French) synagogue on the Rue Copernic, Adath Shalom has grown steadily over the years and has moved from smaller quarters to its present space, which it rents from the city of Paris. It shows every sign of growing, with more than 150 member families, a nursery school, a Hebrew school, adult education classes and a monthly bulletin. The congregation even needs to rent extra space for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur services.

To understand how Adath Shalom is revolutionary, one needs to understand a bit of French-Jewish history. French Jewry governs itself through an organization called the *Consistoire Central de France* (Central Consistory of France). Comprised of a central chief rabbinate in Paris and regional chief rabbinates, the *Consistoire* was founded in 1808 following the French Revolution, when the Jews of France were granted civil rights. Set up under the direction of Napoleon, whose goal was to make mainstream Frenchmen out of Jews, it was a vehicle for the centralization and standardization of Jewish life, worship, education and clerical functions in service to the needs of the French state. Napoleon had no use for Jews

or Jewish religious observance; he thought it was for the good of France to take these outsiders and make them Frenchmen first and Jews second.

Before the *Consistoire*, Jews in France had run their own religious life without harsh interference. They were subject to special taxes, property confiscation, expulsions, murder and restrictive laws, but in the realm of religion they were pretty much left alone. With the institution of the *Consistoire*, that changed.

Along with civil rights came many new responsibilities. No longer Jews in France, they became French Jews. Napoleon saw to it this distinction was formally codified. It was a hard bargain — civil rights or religious autonomy. French Jewry chose the former. Rabbis took on duties similar to those of Christian ministers (including the wearing of clerical garb) and instituted rituals often mirroring Christian ones. Synagogues were redesigned to look more Christian.

For the past 200 years, French Jews lived with this arrangement and even thrived, becoming an integral part of France, even rebounding from nightmares such as the Dreyfus Affair and the Holocaust. Like Jews in other liberal societies, they forsook traditional Judaism for more secular, cultural forms.

Not the *Consistoire*. Founded at a time when Orthodox Judaism was the norm, the *Consistoire* has remained traditional to this day. As Orthodoxy around the world becomes increasingly resolute, so does the French-Jewish establishment. France's centralized Orthodox rabbinate controls synagogues, Jewish education, kosher food and Jewish marriages — in fact, nearly every aspect of Jewish life.

According to Adath Shalom's former president, Claude Machline, the difficulties created for many Jews by the stridency of the *Consistoire* were what gave birth to the nascent French Masorti movement.

As the sole Conservative synagogue in Paris, walking a middle ground between Orthodoxy and Reform, Adath Shalom tries "to promote a modern approach to Judaism while remaining faithful to Halacha," said another former president, Mark Ellison. So, for example, while the congregation gives full rights to women, it requires men to cover their heads.

Adath Shalom has grown more than tenfold in the 13 years since its founding. Still, the congregation's leaders realize that for their synagogue to thrive on French soil it must reach out and present Conservative Judaism as a desirable way of life for the thousands of French Jews who do not now participate in formal Jewish observance. It is now one of two Conservative congregations in France, and they join a growing number of Conservative congregations in Europe, where Conservative Judaism still plays a far smaller role than it

does in North America. This past March, Adath Shalom played host to the first international Masorti conference, with some 100 participants from more than 30 countries.

At a recent Friday night service, people milled around the entry hall, chatting. The talk turned to the situation in Israel and the effect it has had on Europe and France. With some 100 incidents of anti-Jewish violence during the past few weeks, including synagogue burnings, vandalism, physical and verbal attacks on Jews, and Muslim street marches calling for "death to the Jews," Jews here are feeling a tension reminiscent of 60 years ago.

The place was packed and the service lively — due in no small part to Adath Shalom's Belgian born rabbi, Rivon Krygier, who has been with the congregation almost from the beginning. Ordained at the Masorti Rabbinic Seminary in Jerusalem, Rabbi Krygier holds a doctorate in religious studies from the University of Paris. As one of two Conservative rabbis in France, he also serves as the Masorti movement's French spokesman.

In Paris, Jewish history is all around. It is seen in the tangle of streets of the Pletzl, a Jewish quarter on and off for centuries, and in the statues on the front of Notre Dame depicting the struggle between Judaism and Christianity. It is seen in the grand synagogues built during the first flower of Jewish emancipation in the mid-19th century and in the plaques on buildings commemorating Jews murdered by the Germans and their French collaborators during the Holocaust. With its nondescript building, Adath Shalom does not seem as grand or poignant as these places. But in a city filled with French Jewish history it looks as though it certainly will be a part of the French Jewish future.

— TONI L. KAMINS

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