

Comparison of attitudes, behaviours and values of French Jewish families with children enrolled in Jewish day schools and other school systems

Erik H. Cohen

School of Education, Bar Ilan University

Published in

A. Pomson & H. Deitcher (Eds.), (2009). *Jewish day schools, Jewish communities: A reconsideration*. Oxford, UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 207-221.

This article compares the background, attitudes, values and practices of French Jewish families who send their children to Jewish day schools with those who send their children to public school or non-Jewish private schools. Choice of school plays a pivotal role in the formation and expression of French-Jewish identity.

The issue of school choice and the identity struggle of French Jews must be understood in the context of the long and rich history of the Jews in France. Throughout their many centuries in the country, the Jewish community waxed and waned as they were subjected to periodic legal restrictions, taxation, violent attacks, forced conversion attempts, blood libel trials and expulsion orders. Despite all this, the Jewish communities in the region persevered, and some of the most famous Torah scholars of all time came from France. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution brought political emancipation to the Jews. However, the equality extended to all French citizens was granted with the expectation that allegiance would be exclusively to the State, and all affiliation with ethnic or religious communities would be strictly private and subordinate to citizenship. This philosophy, which discourages affiliation with ethnic or religious sub-groups, still guides the political culture of France.

Today, the Jewish community of France is the second largest Diaspora community in the world¹ and one of the most vibrant. The French Jewish community has experienced major demographic and cultural upheavals since World War II. Under the Nazi-occupied Vichy regime, a quarter of the Jews of France were killed or deported, and the institutional and educational structure of the community was almost completely destroyed. The psychological impact was equally traumatic. In the decades following WWII, Jewish refugees from other European countries as well as half a million Jews from France's newly independent colonies in North Africa immigrated to France. While patriotic and largely integrated into French culture, French Jews are attempting to navigate between expression of Jewish identity and respect for the Republican ideals of universalism and *laïcité* [non-denominationalism].

During the last decade, and especially during the last five years, this struggle, which is simultaneously taking place on a larger scale throughout French society, has been described as a debate between 'republicans' and 'communitarians'. The term 'communitarian', which sometimes takes on accusatory or derogatory connotations, refers to those who affiliate with a particular ethnic or religious community, while 'republicans' insist on loyalty only to the French nation.

¹ According to DellaPergola et al., *Between Thriving and Decline*, France is home to just under half a million Jews, while Russia has just under a quarter of a million Jews. Other sources estimate the Jewish population of Russia as significantly higher, possibly making it the second largest Diapora population. Based on my familiarity with DellaPergola's work and methods, I accept his figure as the most accurate, but recognize the inherent difficulty in assessing the number of Jews remaining in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This issue, as it relates to schooling in France is complex. The public school system plays an important role in reinforcing French ideals of citizenship, with an emphasis on universalism and secularism. Sending one's children to a private, parochial school is viewed by some as bordering on unpatriotic². However, the enforced secularism of the public schools may be problematic for traditional Jewish families. For example, neither students nor faculty members are allowed to display outward signs of religious affiliation such as *tzitzit* or a *kippa*, and classes are held on Saturdays³.

While the latent direction of French policy is to build a general French identity and not sub-cultures, for many decades the French government has accepted the development of private schools (primarily Catholic and Jewish), providing finances and professional support for private schools in contract with the State. Recent improvements in the academic standards of Jewish day schools and partial subsidizing of parochial schools, combined with an increase in drugs, violence and anti-Semitic incidents in public schools, have contributed to the rise in Jewish day school attendance in recent decades, including among non-religious families.⁴ There has also been an increase in the number of Jewish students enrolled in non-Jewish private schools⁵. The latter families are withdrawing their children from the public school system but, for a variety of ideological and logistical reasons, choose not to send their children to Jewish day schools.

Methodology

The data used in this article are drawn from a comprehensive survey of the heads of French Jewish households conducted in January 2002. Since French census records do not include religion, a list of Jewish family names was compiled and a sample of heads of households with these last names was contacted by telephone. 1,132 questionnaires were completed by household heads who defined themselves as Jewish or Israelite. In this comparison, only respondents with school aged children are included. Of the 817 school age children in the surveyed families, 26% are enrolled in Jewish day schools. The data presented in this article relates to the surveyed parents of the children, comparing those with children enrolled in Jewish day schools and those whose children are *not* enrolled in Jewish day schools (no differentiation is made here between those in public and those in non-Jewish private schools).⁶

The results were first analyzed using cross-tabulations. While there is much to learn from these tables, it is difficult to see the inter-relationships between the data. In order to portray graphically the 'structure' of the data, a multi-dimensional scaling technique known as Smallest Space Analysis (SSA) was used.⁷ In the SSA procedure,

² Shurkin, 'Decolonization' and Laborde, 'The Culture(s) of the Republic'.

³ Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diasporas*, and Shurkin, 'Decolonization'.

⁴ Cohen, *Les Juifs de France* and Cohen, 'Are there potential clients?'

⁵ Lefkovits, 'Third of French Jews Send Children to Catholic Schools'. My research on French Jewry conducted in 2007 is cited in this article.

⁶ It is likely that some families have chosen, for various personal reasons, to send some of their children to Jewish day schools and other to public or other private schools. However, the survey asked only if the family's children attend JDS or not, so such details are not included. Nevertheless, the numbers of families who use more than one school system are small and would not effect the overall results of this analysis.

⁷ For detailed information on Smallest Space Analysis procedure see Guttman, 'A General Nonmetric Technique'; Guttman 'Facet Theory'; Levy, *Louis Guttman on Theory and Methodology*; Canter, *Facet Theory*; and Borg and Lingoes, *Multidimensional Similarity Structure Analysis*.

the correlations between the selected variables⁸ are plotted as points in a Euclidean space called 'smallest space'.⁹ The points are plotted according to an intuitively understood principle: the greater the correlation between two variables, the closer they will be located on the map; the weaker the correlation between two variables, the further apart they will be.¹⁰ This procedure enables us to consider the correlations between all variables simultaneously. In the resulting map, contiguous regions of related variables may be recognized and interpreted in relation to the theoretical basis of the study.

Once the map of the original variables is created, external variables such as sub-populations may be added into the map. This feature distinguishes the SSA from other, similar, multi-dimensional data analysis techniques. A correlation matrix is calculated between each of the external variables (in this case French Jewish families with and without children enrolled in Jewish day schools) and the original variables. The external variables are then placed one by one into a 'fixed' map in such a way that the original structure is not altered. In other words, the placement of the external variables is determined by the original variables, but the placement of the original variables is not affected by the external variables.¹¹

Results

General background

As the French Jewish population is approximately 70% Sephardic, the vast majority of Jewish families with children in either Jewish day schools or in public and other private schools is Sephardic. However, Ashkenazi families are proportionately less likely to have their children enrolled in Jewish day school. Families with children in Jewish day schools are somewhat more right-leaning politically, though not dramatically so. Respondents with children in Jewish day schools are 10% more likely to have reported being victims of anti-Semitism within the past five years, although it is not clear which is the cause and which is the effect. While the rise of anti-Semitism has contributed to the rise in day school enrolment,¹² attacks on Jews may be more common around synagogues and Jewish schools.¹³ 'The majority of anti-Semitic acts, particularly verbal attacks on Jewish students, take place in schools'.¹⁴

Attitudes towards Israel

⁸ In this case the monotonicity correlation, a non-linear coefficient of correlation, was used. The non-linear MONCO correlations are always higher than the more traditional, linear, Pearson correlations because MONCO measures whether or not two items increase or decrease in the same direction. It is more sensitive (though less useful as a predictor), and recognizes a wider variety of correlations as "perfect".

⁹ This is done using the Hebrew University Data Analysis Package. See Amar and Toledano, *HUDAP Manual with Mathematics* and Amar and Toledano, *HUDAP – Hebrew University Data Analysis Package*.

¹⁰ Guttman, 'A General Nonmetric Technique'; and Levy, *Louis Guttman on Theory and Methodology*.

¹¹ Cohen and Amar, 'External Variables'.

¹² Cohen, *L'Etude et l'éducation juive*, and Trigano *French Anti-Semitism*.

¹³ Cohen and Ifergan, *La jeunesse juive*.

¹⁴ Suzan and Dreyfus, *Muslims and Jews in France*, 6.

Overall, the Jews of France feel connected to Israel, as seen in Table 1. The level of connection is stronger among those with children in Jewish day schools, who are somewhat more likely to describe their connection to Israel as 'very close'. The families with children in Jewish day schools are somewhat more likely to have children or other close relatives in Israel (68%, compared to 53% of the other families), but the vast majority of French Jews have family and friends in Israel. The Jewish day school families are somewhat more likely to have made multiple trips to Israel, although the frequency of visits among families with children in other school systems is also high. Almost a fifth of the families who do not send their children to Jewish schools have never visited Israel, compared to only 7% of those with children enrolled in private Jewish schools. The Jewish day school families are significantly more likely to be considering making aliyah 'very soon' and were more enthusiastic about supporting their children making such a move. A hypothetical question asking respondents to choose a religion and nationality if they could be 'born again' enabled them to express feelings about living in Israel without considering practical obstacles. Far more of the parents with children in Jewish day schools said they would prefer to have been born Jewish in Israel. While no-one said they would prefer to be non-Jewish, almost a fifth of the parents whose children are not in Jewish day schools said religion and nationality would not be important to them, compared with only 5% of those with children in Jewish day schools. This indicates the more widespread acceptance of universal values among families who chose non-Jewish schools, an issue which will be revisited later.

Community life

Parents with children in Jewish day schools are much more active in the local Jewish community, as seen in Table 2. They participate more often and are more likely to volunteer their time with the Jewish community. They are more than twice as likely to listen to Jewish radio programs and read the Jewish press: 43% of those with children in Jewish day schools listen daily to Jewish radio programs and 48% read the Jewish press often, compared to 21% and 22%, respectively, of the families with children in other school systems.¹⁵ This not only indicates greater interest in news relevant to the Jewish community; the Jewish media are an important outlet for announcing events and thus facilitate participation. Interestingly, the families with children in Jewish day schools are also slightly more likely to volunteer in general (not specifically Jewish) community projects, though the difference is less.

Religious practice

The most dramatic difference between the two groups is in terms of religious practice, as seen in Table 3. Those with children in Jewish day schools are more likely to describe themselves as orthodox or traditional, though it is worth noting that almost half of those with children in other school systems describe themselves as traditional. The parents of children in Jewish day schools are far more likely to observe religious commandments, but again, it is worth noting that over half the families with children in non-Jewish schools regularly practice traditions such as having a family Shabbat meal, lighting candles and making Kiddush. Almost none of the parents of Jewish day school students are married to a non-Jew (1%), whereas a third of the non-JDS parents are inter-faith couples. Logically, the Jewish day school parents are also much more strongly opposed to intermarriage among their children.

Almost half the parents with children in Jewish day schools described

¹⁵ For reasons of space, not all the data is included in the tables. The full data is available upon request from the author.

themselves as more religious than their parents and also as having become more religious than they used to be. This increase in religiosity may be a cause or a consequence of the enrolment of children in Jewish day schools, or a combination of both.¹⁶ Among the families with children in other schools, whereas over a third said they are less religious than their parents, just under a third said they are more religious than their parents, and over a third said they are more religious than they used to be. Taken together, these results indicate a revival of Jewish practice among French Jews.

Attitudes about education

Just under half of the parents with children in Jewish day schools think the schools should totally observe religious commandments and traditions. The rest, along with the majority of those who do not send their children to Jewish schools, think the schools should partially observe the tradition to varying degrees, reflecting the traditional but not orthodox character of the French Jewish population. Interestingly, there is little difference in the rating of the quality of French Jewish day schools between those who send their children and those who don't, indicating that other reasons (predominantly religious and ideological, although also possibly logistical and practical) motivate the choice of school system. At the same time, only 10% of the non-Jewish day school parents said that giving their children a Jewish education is not important, and almost 60% said it is very important. Some may send their children to extra-curricular formal or informal Jewish educational programs.

Structure of values

The heads of households were given a list of values and asked to rate the importance of each. Based on these results, four profiles of French Jews were identified: individualists, traditionalists, universalists and revivalists. Revivalists place emphasis both on traditional and individualist values. Table 4 shows the percentage of those with children in Jewish day schools and in other schools who fit each of these profiles. Those with children in Jewish day schools are more likely to be traditionalists. Although the traditionalists are also the most common profile among the families with children in other schools, this group also has significant percentages who fit the individualist and universalist profiles, which are rare among the Jewish day school families.

Figure 1 shows a graphic portrayal of the structure of values held by heads of French Jewish households. The two sub-groups of families with and without children enrolled in Jewish day schools are shown in relationship to this structure. The value 'making the most of life' is at the centre of the typology, surrounded by regions of values which relate to Enjoyment (social life and recreation), Materialism, Tradition, Altruism, and Authenticity. Additionally, within this map we see two axes: a political axis from autonomy to authority and a social axis from altruism to egoism. The families with children in Jewish day schools are between the regions of Traditional values, which include items such as founding a family, honouring parents and belief in God, and the region of Altruism, which contains items such as community and helping others. Those with children in other schools are close to the centre of the map, in the Enjoyment region.

Insert Figure 1 here.

¹⁶ Formal and informal Jewish educational settings have been found to have an impact on ritual observance of the participants' family. See Cohen, *One Movement, Many Faces*.

Discussion and Conclusion

The issue of school choice provides insight into the difficult questions of identity faced by the Jews of France today. The French nation as a whole is undergoing an 'identity crisis' related to the integration of minority groups and the predominance of the Republican values on which the state is based. While it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the myriad, deep-rooted and serious conflicts related to immigration and national identity which have been raised in France (and indeed across Europe) in recent years, it may be noted that the Jews find themselves in a delicate position. The Jews of France are well-integrated into the general population. They are strongly patriotic, and embrace the political emancipation granted to them by the secular state. Nevertheless, many in the relatively traditional French-Jewish population do not wish to relegate their religious practice and culture entirely to the 'private' domain. A more public type of Judaism has emerged, including national identity expressed through connection with the State of Israel. At the same time, the French Jewish population has been put on the defensive by anti-Israel rhetoric and a resurgence of violent, anti-Semitic acts, primarily at the hands of youth from the growing French-Muslim population. In response to this difficult situation, some Jews have questioned their future in France. A third of the heads of French-Jewish households surveyed said they do not see themselves living in France within the next several years¹⁷ and the rate of *aliyah* from France rose by 27% in 2005¹⁸. Nevertheless, most French Jews are not leaving France, and are therefore in the process of negotiating the nature of their French-Jewish identity. Various responses are possible, as seen in the profiles identified, ranging from stronger affiliation with the Jewish community to accelerated assimilation into the general population.

School choice is a critical piece in this puzzle. The results of this analysis show the situation should not be over-simplified. Religiously traditional families may choose to send their children to public schools and secular families may choose to send their children to Jewish day schools. However, overall we can see that the families who send their children to private Jewish schools are more religiously observant and more strongly connected to Israel than those with children in other school systems. The multi-dimensional analysis of values shows that the families with children in Jewish day schools place more emphasis on family, community and religious belief, while those with children in non-Jewish schools emphasize universal values of autonomy and personal enjoyment.

The impact and influence of the Jewish day school extends beyond the classroom. For example, students meet on Sundays and holidays for informal, social activities, and therefore their families meet, creating a community with the school as its centre. In addition, many families who do not live close to a Jewish day school are faced with the choice of either sending their children long distances by public, private or school-organized transportation or of re-locating to a neighbourhood near a Jewish school. As a result, apartments in neighbourhoods near Jewish day schools have become expensive and hard to find (as seen in the case of the school in Pavillons-sous-Bois¹⁹). As families with children in Jewish day school concentrate in certain

¹⁷ Cohen, *Touristes Juifs* and Cohen, *Les Juifs de France*.

¹⁸ Reuters, 'Suspect in murder of French Jew held in Ivory Coast'.

¹⁹ Rachel Cohen, principal of the school, personal communication, 2005.

neighbourhoods, the school takes on the role of synagogue (on Shabbat and holidays) and quasi community centre.

Coda

Interestingly, the distinctive environment of a French Jewish day school may soon be carried into Israel. Surveys of French Jews have found that a very high percentage of both tourists and immigrants to Israel have children in Jewish day schools. Some community leaders and educators are advocating founding schools in Israel specifically for *olim* from France. This suggests that the French Jewish day school has a particular style and environment found neither in French public schools nor in any of the educational streams already present in Israel. The particular style of French Jewish day schools and of schools for French immigrants in Israel have not yet been analysed in the scientific literature.

From my own familiarity with the field of Jewish education in France and Israel, I can offer a few observations: French-Jewish parents are most likely to be looking for a school in which discipline is clear rather than the laissez-faire approach more common in Israeli schools; they want a school with a fairly high level of religious practice and learning yet which is not ultra-orthodox; they expect to be able to maintain their own level of religious practice in the home without the requirements and restrictions sometime imposed by Israeli religious schools. Additionally, French *olim* may wish for their children to continue to be familiar with French language, culture and values, even while living in Israel.

In sum, the whole informal environment surrounding the school must be considered in order to understand the roles Jewish day schools and public schools play in French-Jewish society. Far from being an enclave for the most orthodox families, the private Jewish day school has become a site for expressing Jewish identity and creating Jewish community among a population facing rapid social change. In the coming years, as social researchers observe and analyze the French Jewish community, it will be crucial to pay close attention to the role of the Jewish day school.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Allison Ofanansky for her editorial contribution in the preparation of the article.

References

- Amar, Reuven and Toledano, Shlomo, *HUDAP Manual with Mathematics* (Jerusalem, 1997).
- Amar, Reuven and Toledano, Shlomo. *HUDAP – Hebrew University Data Analysis Package* (Jerusalem, 2002).
- Borg, I. and Lingoes, J. *Multidimensional Similarity Structure Analysis* (New York, 1987).
- Canter, David (ed.), *Facet Theory: Approaches to Social Research* (New York, 1985).
- Cohen, Erik H. 'Are there potential clients for the Jewish day schools in France? An a posteriori analysis of a prognosis', in DellaPergola, S. (ed.) in press.
- Cohen Erik H. *Touristes Juifs de France en 2004* (Paris-Jerusalem, 2005).
- Cohen, Erik H. *One Movement, Many Faces: Survey of Members of Bnei Akiva in the World, Executive Summary* (Jerusalem, 2004).

- Cohen Erik H. *Les Juifs de France: Valeurs et identité* (Paris, 2002).
- Cohen, Erik H. *L'Etude et l'éducation juive en France*. (Paris, 1991).
- Cohen, Erik H. and Amar, Reuven, 'External Variables as Points in Smallest Space Analysis: A Theoretical, Mathematical and Computer-based Contribution', *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 75 (2002), 40-56.
- Cohen, Erik H. and Ifergan, Maurice, *La jeunesse juive: Entre France et Israël* (Paris, 2005).
- DellaPergola, Sergio, et al. *Between Thriving and Decline: The Jewish People 2004* (New York and Jerusalem, 2004).
- Guttman, Louis, 'Facet Theory, Smallest Space Analysis, and Factor Analysis' *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 54 (1982), 491-493.
- Guttman, Louis, 'A General Nonmetric Technique for Finding the Smallest Coordinate Space for a Configuration of Points', *Psychometrika*, 33 (1968), 469-506.
- Laborde, Cécile, 'The Culture(s) of the Republic: Nationalism and Multiculturalism in French Republican Thought', *Political Theory*, 29 (2001), 716-735.
- Lefkovits, Etgar, 'Third of French Jews Send Children to Catholic Schools', *The Jerusalem Post*, (2007, April 4).
- Levy, Shlomit, (ed.), *Louis Guttman on Theory and Methodology: Selected Writings* (Dartmouth, 1994).
- Reuters. 'Suspect in murder of French Jew held in Ivory Coast', (2006, 23 February).
- Shurkin, Michael R. 'Decolonization and the Renewal of French Judaism: Reflections on the Contemporary French Jewish Scene', *Jewish Social Studies*, 6 (2000), 156-171.
- Suzan, Bénédicte and Dreyfus, Jean-Marc, *Muslims and Jews in France: Communal Conflict in a Secular State* (Washington, DC, 2004).
- Trigano, Shmuel, [*French Anti-Semitism: A Barometer for Gauging Society's Perverseness: An Interview with Shmuel Trigano by Manfred Gerstenfeld*](#), (Jerusalem, 2004).
- Wasserstein, B. *Vanishing Diasporas: The Jews in Europe since 1945*, (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

Table 1: Attitudes towards Israel

	Parents of children NOT in Jewish day school	Parents of children in Jewish day school (kindergarten, elementary or secondary)	total
Feeling of connection to Israel			
<i>Very close</i>	43	66	48
<i>Close</i>	37	30	37
<i>Distant</i>	17	2	13
<i>Very distant</i>	3	2	2
Total	100	100	100
Personal connections in Israel			
<i>Children</i>	4	4	4
<i>Close relatives</i>	49	64	52
<i>Distant relatives</i>	24	22	23
<i>Friends but not relatives</i>	9	8	8
<i>No-one</i>	15	3	12
Total	100	100	100
Number of visits to Israel			
<i>None</i>	19	7	16
<i>One-two</i>	15	9	13
<i>Three-four</i>	16	18	9
<i>Five or more</i>	50	66	54
Total	100	100	100
Are you considering making aliyah?			
<i>Yes, very soon</i>	5	30	11
<i>Yes, later</i>	18	34	21
<i>I considered it but changed my mind</i>	7	3	6
<i>Eventually</i>	18	14	17
<i>No</i>	52	19	45
If your children wanted to make aliyah would you...			
<i>Encourage them</i>	44	60	48
<i>Be pleased</i>	41	32	39
<i>Not oppose</i>	10	6	9
<i>Be disturbed</i>	4	2	3
<i>Oppose</i>	1	0	1
Total	100	100	100
'If you could be born again, what would you chose to be?'			
<i>Jewish in France</i>	30	20	28

<i>Non-Jew in France</i>	0	0	0
<i>Jewish in another Diaspora country</i>	6	3	6
<i>Jewish in Israel</i>	45	72	50
<i>Religion and nationality not important</i>	19	5	16
Total	100	100	100

Table 2: Community life

	Parents of children NOT in Jewish day school	Parents of children in Jewish day school (kindergarten, elementary or secondary)	Total
How often do you participate in the local Jewish community?			
<i>Never</i>	17	0	13
<i>Rarely</i>	14	8	13
<i>Occasionally</i>	15	6	14
<i>Often</i>	20	14	18
<i>Very often</i>	34	72	42
Total	100	100	100
Do you volunteer in the Jewish community?			
<i>Yes</i>	25	48	30
Do you volunteer in the general community?			
<i>Yes</i>	11	16	12

Table 3: Religious attitudes and behaviours

	Parents of children NOT in Jewish day school	Parents of children in Jewish day school (kindergarten, elementary or secondary)	Total
Level of Religious practice			
<i>Non practicing</i>	30	1	24
<i>Liberal</i>	14	1	11
<i>Traditional</i>	47	69	52
<i>Orthodox</i>	9	29	13
Total	100	100	100
Endogamy/exogamy			
<i>Spouse Jewish</i>	66	99	74
<i>Spouse non-Jewish</i>	33	1	26
<i>Spouse converted</i>	1	0	<1
Do you eat kosher at home?			
<i>Always</i>	48	95	59
Do you eat kosher outside the home?			
<i>Always</i>	33	79	44
Does your family light candles Friday night			
<i>Regularly</i>	55	95	64
Does your family make Kiddush on Shabbat evening			
<i>Regularly</i>	60	98	69
Do you refrain from working on Shabbat?			
<i>Regularly</i>	49	87	58
Do you have a family meal on Shabbat day?			
<i>Regularly</i>	75	96	80
Do you go to synagogue on Shabbat?			
<i>Regularly</i>	28	65	37

Table 4: Profiles of French Jewish families

	Parents of children NOT in Jewish day school	Parents of children in Jewish day school (kindergarten, elementary or secondary)	Total
Profile			
<i>Individualists</i>	20	8	16
<i>Universalists</i>	23	6	20
<i>Traditionalists</i>	34	52	38
<i>Revivalists</i>	23	34	26
Total	100	100	100

Figure 1: Cognitive Map of Values of French Jews with the Enrolment or Non-Enrolment in Jewish Day Schools (JDS) of the Various Families

