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# Antisemitism pushing jews out of their homes in France

COMMENTS

By Valérie Gauriat (<https://twitter.com/valgauriat>) • last updated: 29/06/2018

Antisemitism pushing France's Jews to consider Israel move



(/2018/06/29/antisemitism-pushing-france-s-jews-to-consider-israel-move)

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Nestled in a quiet street of Bondy, a suburb of Paris, is a synagogue protected by high walls, electronic gates and CCTV cameras. Armand Azoulay, its president, greets us as morning prayers begin. It's Sunday and only about 15 worshippers are in attendance. But even on Saturdays, the Sabbath and usually the busiest day, barely 40 people turn up. A few years ago it would have been more than 100. Armand has been working hard to revive the once flourishing community life in the area. The place of worship is also at the heart of the social life of the town's Jewish families.

"We've invested a lot in the synagogue," he says. "We've refreshed it. We've started many activities that have encouraged people to come back."

Faced with a rise in antisemitic acts it was also necessary to reassure people that it was safe to come attend.

Reinforced doors, reinforced windows, reinforced walls! Cameras!" says Rabbi Iano Azoulay. "Why? Because there is aggression. There are opponents of Judaism. We will not mention them. But there are opponents! What do they want? They want to scare us? To terrorise us? So we're afraid and run away? Is that what they want? What we hope is to continue. What we hope is to be able to live in France. The synagogue is brand new. We did not do that to leave. We did that to stay."

## Desperate measures

In the past fifteen years, the number of Jewish families in Bondy has fallen from nearly 500 to less than 200. The reasons for leaving are many, including marriage and work opportunities. But in recent years fear has been a major

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factor.

"We come in the morning, we never know what will be in the news," says Norbert Allouche, a worshipper at the synagogue. "In addition, they've brought in to France this issue of the Palestinians. That's not right. We live in France, we don't live in Israel, for now."

Another worshipper, Raphael Cohen, takes extra precautions: "I have to disguise myself to go to the synagogue because I can't come with my kippa on my head. So I have to put on a cap... because there are some places here where people are really hostile to the Jewish community."

That's hostility that Armand's son, Nethaniel, along with his older brother, painfully experienced last year. As they were driving home, wearing kippas, the pair were brutally assaulted by another motorist. Shouting antisemitic insults, the man forced them out of their car and attacked them with a saw. Nethaniel prevented the man from slitting his brother's throat, but, ended up with a dislocated shoulder and severe cuts to his hand.

The 18-year-old says what saved him was the sport he has been doing with his father since childhood - Krav Contact. Armand is a teacher of the martial art, which is practiced by the Israeli army.

"If I hadn't known how to defend myself, and I hadn't known how to disarm him, I couldn't have helped my brother. This sport saved me from dying with my brother," says Nethaniel, who now teaches Krav to his younger brother.

Since the attack, Nethaniel avoids wearing his kippa outside neighborhoods where he feels safe, as he does in the 19th arrondissement of Paris, where many Jewish families from the Parisian suburbs have resettled. Armand has a travel agency in the district and his son works there from time to time.

Nethaniel says the family is slowly recovering from the traumatic experience of the attack: "With what happened, frankly at first we thought of leaving the country. We wanted to leave. My father said no, we stay here. We can't let this experience bring us down."

Armand's determination to stay runs deep: "My father left Morocco after a pogrom in which 47 Jews were massacred, just after Israel's independence," he says. "My wife is from Russia, her father was in the gulag. We wonder if we can ever settle down anywhere. I took a gamble, saying: 'I think we can stay'. If we want to make sure that Jews can stay in France, our authorities must understand that something has to be done now, without delay."

## **Israel on the horizon?**

Antisemitic acts often raise among French Jews the prospect of what is known as 'aliya' - or departure to Israel. But they have mostly caused an internal displacement, as was the experience of one woman we talked to. 'Nathalie' (not her real name) left the suburb where she had been renting a house with her husband and three children for almost 10 years.

She took us to her former home to recount the experiences that forced the family out: "Here it is," she says, pointing to the front of the house. "I'm coming back almost a year later. That's where we got burgled, when we were sleeping. They stole everything. They broke my son's motorbike, stole the elder one's motorbike. And not even a month later, in the parking lot, which is right there, not even 10 meters from our front door, one morning I found my car all scratched. They engraved the word 'Jew' on the driver's side... across the whole door."

But it wasn't just scratches on the paintwork. Shortly after Nathalie drove off she realised two of her tyres had been slashed.

"The police advised us firmly: " you go, you have to flee, you have to flee! That's it. We had to flee from antisemitism, in 2017."

The family stayed with Nathalie's parents for several months, until they found a new home, an apartment in a block in a neighboring suburb.

"Step by step, we try to live normally again. We get things back together again, day by day." she says.

Nathalie is still recovering from the shock she suffered but insists nothing would make her want to leave France. Though she does confess to having her doubts:

"Of course we are Jewish, but above all we are French. At the beginning, when I was asked, 'do you want us to help you do aliyah, to go to Israel?' I said no way! It would mean not only did we have to flee from our home, but now we would to leave everything, give everything up! I've worked in the same place for 20 years. My husband, my children, their sport. They've just started working. We don't know the language. We don't have a job there. We can't just go like that! Then you see, the more time passes and the more incidents we hear of in the media. I say to myself, maybe, in fact, they are right. I think one day or another, we'll end up leaving."

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