

Jews in France Face a Dilemma

To wear or not to wear a kippa, that is the question for Jews in France today.

France in recent months has been the venue for a number of indiscriminate jihadist attacks against innocent civilians but the favorite targets of Islamists are members of the Jewish community. Three such attacks have occurred in the last four months. On January 11, 2016, Ben Amsalem, a 35 year old teacher, an Orthodox Jew, in a Jewish school in Marseille, was attacked and stabbed by a 15 year old ethnic Kurd from Turkey who declared he was acting in the name of Islam.

On October 24, 2015, a Muslim Arab, shouting anti-Semitic remarks, attacked a rabbi and two worshippers outside a synagogue in Marseille. On November 18, 2015 a Jewish teacher was stabbed and seriously injured by a man, accompanied by two others, who wore a T-shirt with the logo of ISIS on it. What is most frightening is that most of the Islamist attackers in 2015 were French citizens, so called "children of immigration," who were adherents or supporters of ISIS.

Islamist terrorism is not confined to Jews. The worst events were the attacks on bars, a rock concert, and the national stadium, that killed 130 people on November 13, 2015. Even on January 7, 2016, the anniversary of the massacres in Paris of 17 people in *Charlie Hebdo* offices and the kosher Hyper Cacher supermarket, a Muslim man born in Morocco, carrying a meat cleaver and wearing a fake suicide belt tried to attack a police station near Montmartre. He carried a paper pledging allegiance to ISIS and shouted "Allahu Akbar," before being shot dead

It is also true that some Muslim women in the U.S. have faced a similar problem as French Jews, and those who wear headscarves have experienced harassments and threats,

especially after the Islamists attacks in Paris and in San Bernardino, California. But the meaningful difference is that Muslim women have rarely, if ever, been attacked or murdered in the savage ways that Jews have experienced.

In response to the Islamist terrorists, France and the rest of the world today might remember the words of its great writer Victor Hugo. At a moment of massacres occurring during the Paris commune, Hugo in a speech reported on December 1, 1870 declared, "Paris is the very center of humanity. He who attacks Paris attacks the entire human race. That (Paris) should be violated, broken, taken by assault – by whom? By a savage invasion? It cannot be. It will not be, never, never, never."

All France is menaced by a new savage invasion, but most menaced is the Jewish community. The French writer, Albert Camus, once wrote, "To misname things is to add to the misfortunes of the world." There is no misnaming the presence of Islamist terrorism and the debate that has arisen within the French community. Should Orthodox Jews, who are obliged to wear a head covering, continue to wear a kippa, a yarmulke or skullcap, in public thus indicating their religious faith? Or should they be prudent and cautious and not wear it, thus not be a subject of attack by Islamists? Non-Orthodox Jews wear a kippa only when they enter a synagogue or perform a Jewish ritual.

On one side, Tzvi Ammar, head of the Israelite Consistory of Marseille, making the hardest decision of his life, advised Jews to go without the kippa "until better days." The rationale is that preservation of life is sacrosanct. On the other hand, Michele Teboul, president of the local branch of the CRIF, the umbrella organization for French Jewish institutions, responded that Jews should not remove the kippa, and should wear it as a symbol of their faith. The Chief Rabbi of France, Haim Korsia, also called for Jews to continue to wear the kippa.

In an online campaign by supporters of the Teboul-Korsia point of view, Jews and non-Jews have posted photos of themselves and of celebrities, such as the soccer player David Beckham and actor Robert de Niro, wearing a kippa. Referring to the tag of "Je Suis Charlie," popular last year, these individuals have used a hashtag on Twitter, "Je Suis Kippa."

Estimates by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights show that about a one third of French Jews refrain from wearing Jewish garb or symbols out of fear, and about 25 per cent avoid attending Jewish events or venues for the same reason. Understanding the extent of this fear, President Francois Hollande on January 13, 2016, declared, "We will not tolerate a situation in our country in which citizens feel worried, attacked, stricken for their religion and feel they have to hide." Similarly, at least two members of the French Parliament wore kippas in the National Assembly, a rarity because French law forbids the wearing religious garb on official premises.

The problem is a complex one, involving fear, security, identity, religious freedom of expression, the French policy of secularism, and courage. At the heart of the problem is freedom of religion and the ability to express it. Not wearing the kippa will ensure more safety for the Jewish community. But it will also mean two things: Jews not expressing their Jewish identity and not acknowledging one's faith; and Islamists setting the agenda on how to behave.

There are a number of alternatives. Outsiders who do not face the possibility of attacks in live and dangerous areas should not perhaps have the temerity to recommend a choice. It is natural that people are afraid, although the French Government deployed more than 100,000 personal to reinforce security and offered protection for the 717 Jewish institutions in France. Those who are afraid will opt not to wear a kippa and thus reveal their Jewish identity.

A reasonable, if somewhat timorous, compromise is wearing some other head covering, a hat or cap, either instead of or over a kippa to ensure more safety, especially in areas with a considerable Muslim population.

A third response is a stronger appeal, not only for governmental and police support, but to the compassion and goodwill of the French population, both to prevent Islamist attacks and also to reduce and to legally punish anti-Semitic utterances and behavior. The Chief Rabbi Korsia has called on fans of the football club Olympique Marseille, to show sympathy for the Jewish community, by covering their heads, with some form of hat or cap, at their next game on January 20, 2016. It will be interesting to see the response.

A fourth alternative is greater Jewish precautions and defense measures. Jewish parents are troubled. Jewish children don't go to schools where they are harassed. Only one third of them go to state schools: one third go to Catholic schools, and one third to Jewish schools. To prevent harm to children, some vigilante groups have been set up, such as the Protecting Parents group, launched by SPCJ (Service of Protection of the Jewish Community).

A fifth alternative is to avoid the issue by Jewish exit from France. Already, 9,880 French Jews left for Israel in 2015.

However, as an outsider free from attacks in France and with some gall, one might suggest the proper though risky course for French Jews. It is what a French philosopher has called *Le courage d'avoir peur*, the courage to be afraid. Members of the Jewish community should defy the Islamist terrorists and proudly display their religious faith with the kippa. Fear means subservience, and that means rights will be lost and not easily regained. Conscience should not make cowards of us all.