

The Kippah Should Not Be Checked

by Michael Curtis



Uncertainty pervades many facets of life. First you say you do and then you don't. And then you say you will and then you won't. Sitting on a fence doesn't make much sense. German history exemplifies the ironies of changing circumstances. On September 19, 1941 the Nazi decree of September 1, 1941, signed by Reinhard Heydrich, ordered Jews in areas under Nazi control after September 19 to wear the Jewish star, a badge sewn on their clothes. Today, Germany, and other countries, Jews and non-Jews are perplexed and uncertain over the issue of whether Jews should wear an identifying object, the kippah, Hebrew word for skull cap, in public.

Two principles, alike in dignity, a pair of star-crossed concepts, are dividing opinion among politicians and Jewish communities throughout the world, either abiding by religious

values by wearing the kippah, or behaving out of concern for preservation of life and not wearing it. Though the wearing of a kippah, or yarmulka, the Yiddish equivalent, is not a religious commandment in the biblical sense, Orthodox Jews keep their heads covered, and the kippah is the most visible public religious emblem for Jewish men. But this adherence to tradition conflicts with the imperative necessity for security against antisemites, prepared to kill Jews.

A European Union poll in 2013 of 5,100 European Jews showed the division on the issue. At least a quarter of Europe's Jews said they would not wear the kippah or any other Jewish symbol in public. Forty-nine percent of Swedish Jews and 40% of French Jews say they did not wear Jewish identifying clothing. In France, Marine Le Pen, in a bizarre statement, called for banning the wearing of the kippah in public because it interfered with the fight against Islamism.

A cardinal Jewish principle is *pikuach nefash*, save a life in danger, applicable to an immediate threat or to a danger that might become serious. It implies one can disregard a law that conflicts with life or health. The preservation of life overrides almost all religious considerations. Exemplifying this is the Hebrew toast before drinking wine, *Le Chaim*, to life.

Felix Klein, German Commissioner on antisemitism, on May 25, 2019 declared that Jews would be ill advised to wear a kippah, "everywhere and all the time," in Germany. He was aware of the increase in antisemitism because of the "lifting of inhibitions and the increase in uncouthness," for which the internet and social media were largely responsible. Many incidents confirmed his pessimistic view. A Syrian national of Palestinian background was convicted on April 12, 2018 for assault, using a belt, at an Israeli wearing a kippah. In fact, the victim was not Jewish but an Israeli Arab who had worn the kippah as an experiment to disprove the assertion that it had become unsafe to wear a kippah in public in

Germany.

In Germany a number of incidents revealed the increase in antisemitism. The far right party, AfD, which opposes any atonement for the atrocities of the Nazi regime gained strength: at the European Parliament election on May 26, 2019. The AfD got 7.1% of the vote and won 7 seats. Secondly, there were 1,646 hate crimes against Jews in Germany in 2018. Third, the Lebanese terrorist Hezbollah group has almost a hundred operatives in Germany spreading jihadism and antisemitism. Fourth, Palestinian groups marched in the annual Al-Quds Day, (the day when Israel conquered east Jerusalem in 1967) a rally which started in 1979 and was held on Berlin on July 1, 2018. The crowd shouted, "Palestine will be reborn."

Similarly in France, local incidents brought the kippah issue to the fore. In October 2015 a Jewish teacher was stabbed and seriously injured by a Frenchman of Algerian descent. In January 2016, a Jewish man was stabbed in Marseilles by a Muslim extremist. However, a Paris-Match poll in February 2016 found that 70% would oppose a call to stop wearing the kippah in public. French Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia said that Jews should continue to wear the kippah and not remove their yarmulkas for security reasons thus giving in to terrorists.

Differences were strongly expressed in France as elsewhere. In January 2016 Tzvi Amar, president of the local office of the Consistoire in Marseilles, responsible for religious services, advised removing the kippah "during these troubled times because the preservation of life is sacrosanct." But Michelle Teboul, president of the local Marseilles branch of CRIF, the umbrella group representing French Jewish communities, said she could not support this action: "Jews could decide whether to wear a hat on top of their kippah, depending on the situation, but removing one's kippah seems unwarranted."

Jewish authorities like all others vary on this issue. The chief rabbi of Brussels Rabbi Albert Guigui has not worn a

visible skull cap since he was assaulted in December 2001 by a group of Arabic speaking youths. Joel Rubinfeld, president of the Belgium League against Antisemitism, LBCA, speaking on a television program, agreed to wear his kippah on the street, but only if the RTBF, public service broadcasting organization, provided a security detail.

After Felix Klein's statement on May 25, expressions of outrage were abundant and focused on what seemed to be Germany's failure to combat antisemitism. Klein the next day, May 26, clarified his message, saying it should be understood as a call to action, "The first step for German society is to raise general awareness of the antisemitic problem."

Some of the criticism of Klein asserted the "kippah belongs (gehört) to Germany." Yet, the problem remains for Jews, should religious individuals wear the kippah, or should they conceal their identity by not wearing it? U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Berlin at the time protested the original Klein statement, expressing his concern that Jews were being discouraged from wearing the yarmulka in public out of safety concerns: "none of us should shrink in the face of prejudice."

One takes for granted the sincerity of Klein, concerned about ongoing brutalization in German society, and honest in his suggestion that all Germans on a given day should wear the kippah as a sign of support. Yet the problem for Jews remains. Should they stick to their religious beliefs, and wear it, or yield to pressure and the interest of physical safety against attack by antisemites and not wear it, or seek a compromise, really false, by wearing a baseball cap instead of a kippah. In April 2014 the Jewish school in Copenhagen advised students to compromise, to wear baseball caps over their yarmulka.

Can appeasement of the antisemitic enemy be conceivable? Appeasement of Adolf Hitler and German Nazism seemed for some an acceptable policy in the 1930s. At the time the voices for appeasement were loud in Britain and France, with Prime

Minister Neville Chamberlain, in the leadership supported by some of the British elite including the military leaders, and considerable public support. Appeasement is based on the principle that concessions are made in order to avoid conflict or to avoid further demands. Few saw the danger until it was too late. "Peace in our time," the Chamberlain mantra led to war.

The events of 1938-39 when Britain and France sought to restrain Hitler and the Nazi Regime by compromises are a testimony to the failure of appeasement. It is now generally accepted that Hitler was always interested in aggression, as shown by the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria, in 1938 and the Sudetenland, part of Czechoslovakia, and the Munich Agreement of September 1938, which were preludes to a general war.

Marine Le Pen in February 2017, giving a strange reason, called for a ban on the wearing of the kippah in public. This, she said, would be part of the struggle against radical Islam. The struggle should be a joint struggle and everyone should sacrifice something. May be for Jews it will do with just wearing a hat instead of a kippah. Her argument, of course, whether sincere or not, ignores the whole nature of Jewish spirituality. It also ignores the dilemma for Jews in making a difficult choice in a situation in which there is no easy answer for individuals. One thing is clear. Everyone can recognize that the 1930s policy of appeasement is a sad story. Appeasing the antisemites, Islamic and far right, by forbidding the wearing of the kippah would be equally sad.