Contemporary Jewish communities in three European cities: Challenges of integration, acculturation and ethnic identity

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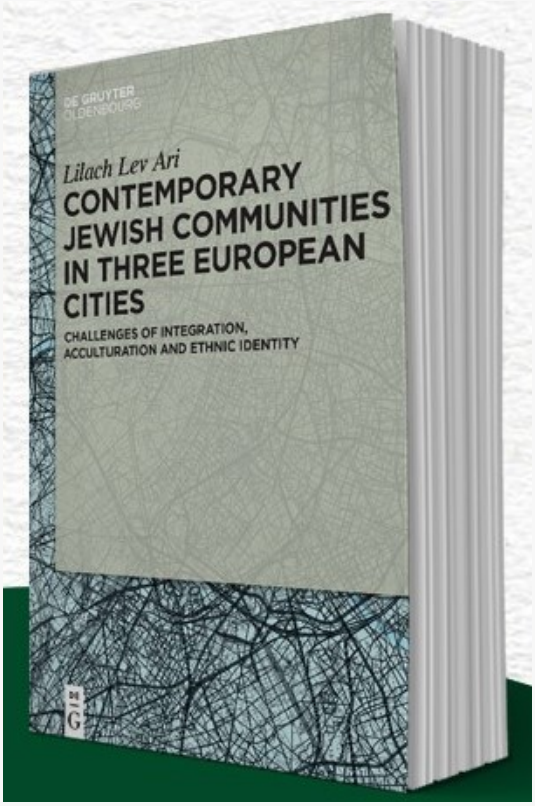

QIRYAT TIV ON, ISRAEL, October 30, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Contemporary Jewish communities in the diaspora face daily questions of mutual relations and integration among the non-Jewish majority, including manifestations of antisemitism, as well as trends of assimilation and demographic decline, along with following trajectories of spiritual existence and continuity. While Jewish communities in the United States have been widely studied, communities in Europe, including that of French Jews - the third largest in the world, have been studied less. The book deals with similarities and differences between three urban Jewish communities in Paris, Brussels and Antwerp, focusing on characteristics of each community - made up of local natives and immigrants - and delineates avenues for its renewal.

Similarly to most contemporary world Jewry, the participants in this study reside in 'world cities', i.e. global

centers of business, politics, culture and technology. In these cities, many Jews tend to dwell in neighborhoods appropriate to their socioeconomic status that provide nearby employment opportunities, facilitate social mobility and offer religious services and Jewish organizations. Furthermore, most Jews in western nations constitute a 'privileged' ethnic minority group: They integrate well culturally, professionally and economically, despite remaining a distinct ethno-cultural group. However, as such, they are particularly vulnerable to attacks from the underprivileged, who direct their resentment of mainstream society towards Jews.

More than half of French Jewry reside in Paris and almost all Belgian Jews dwell equally in the two largest cities in Belgium, Brussels and Antwerp. The three cities are characterized by ethnically diverse Jewish communities: Secular, religious, ultra-Orthodox, Ashkenazi (parents' origin is from Europe or America), Sephardi (parents' origin is from Africa or Asia), as well as native-born and immigrant. Paris as a metropolis and 'world city' has attracted many Jewish migrants for decades, particularly from the Middle East. Brussels, a world city too, serves as the center of the European Union. Due to lack of homogeneous national Belgian population in the city, Brussels, as the center of the European Union, with its EU institutions, is considered cosmopolitan, and attracts many migrants from all over the world, including Israel. Antwerp is unique due to its changing scope and structure of Jewish population, mainly owing to the growing ultra-Orthodox population. Antwerp is also internationally known for its diamond trade, a sector that has been dominated by the large Orthodox Jewish community in the city.

Each community of Jews, native-born and immigrants is subject to different socio-cultural, economic opportunities and policies towards minorities and immigrants in its city of residence. These relationships effect patterns of integration within the majority as well as the choice of acculturation strategies. Although France and Belgium enable and declare equal and liberal opportunities for integration, daily interactions between Jews – though a privileged minority - and the local population seem to limit some, and create new boundaries of segregation and separation from the majority. Some of these xenophobic and racist manifestations towards minorities and immigrants in Europe as a whole, and towards Jews in particular, are overt, and some are subtler, explicit in 'new' and 'old' antisemitic acts.

Macro and micro perceptions, feelings and attitudes, regarding national belonging and local city of residence, apparent in the questionnaires or interviews, reflect currently modified interactions, deriving from new national and local policies as well as local population change. Those who previously felt part of the majority, now may express feelings of exclusion, segregation or even separation. Furthermore, the comparison of three cities and between immigrants and native-born, deepens understanding of the dynamics along the time-line, and facilitates comprehension of current events of inter-relations between West European Jews and the majority. Jews, who constituted a privileged, included minority within pluralistic, multi-cultured and liberal societies, have become gradually excluded in the last decades and turned into 'Others' - overtly and subtly.

These findings expand on other studies, which compare France and Belgium as a whole and not

by city of residence, and do not distinguish between native-born or immigrants. It seems that each community has its own challenges of strength, vitality and potential for continuity. Multiple dynamic Jewish ethnic identity and identification are parts of these challenges and strengths. Demographic and ethnic changes in each city, short-term and long-term immigrants, and their inter-relations with the native-born, construct and re-construct Jewish community religious services or other organizations, which offer Jewish practice and education. These changes have affected acculturation strategies, namely integration and assimilation applied within the three Jewish communities, as well as within the majority. Israel constitutes a significant and central part of Jewish identity and identification for both immigrants and the native-born in the three cities, serving as a spiritual stronghold as well as homeland and concrete option for future migration.

Nevertheless, some sectors in each community still face challenges of assimilation and exclusion. In addition, national attachment to France and Belgium is particularly sensitive and questionable these days, with the rise of antisemitism. However, it seems that all three communities find unique opportunities to maintain their existence, by recruiting their internal powers of both native-born and immigrants, in accord with multiple contemporary manifestations of Jewish identity and identification, as well as by coping with the majority.

The innovation of this study is in its detailed description of updated socio-demographic attributes of age, gender, occupation, educational level, dwelling ownership, ethnic origin affiliation and country of origin, in a comparison between native-born residents and immigrants, and of the three cities. These comparisons elaborate and enrich knowledge regarding Jews in these two countries in a more specific and thorough manner than published so far. The findings point to the different ways in which each of the three communities deals with internal changes in population, the structure of the Jewish organizations and their vitality, and relates to identity and ethnic identification of their members while daily interactions with the non-Jewish majority. All these reinforce the need for new collaborations in Europe, including with the State of Israel, to outline new policies beyond the individual Jewish community.
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