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Next year in Jerusalem? 'La nouvelle judéophobie', neo-crypto-Judaism and the future of French Jews in Éliette Abécassis's *Alyah*

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Abstract
Éliette Abécassis, one of the principal flagbearers of a nascent contemporary Jewish-French literature, has written a novel entitled *Alyah*, which engages in a series of reflections on the future of Jewish life in France. Among other themes, Abécassis tackles the memory of Jewish life in North Africa, especially in Morocco, the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, the affective value of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict for Jews and Muslims in France, and 'la nouvelle judéophobie'. In this article, I read *Alyah* in its socio-political context in order to suggest that, while Abécassis highlights at times the potential for Jewish-Muslim solidarity, the novel ends up reproducing an oppositional, conflictual binary of Jews versus Muslims – something that Maud Mandel has termed a 'narrative of polarisation'.

Keywords
antisemitism, Israeli–Palestinian conflict in France, Jewish-French literature Jewish–Muslim relations, 'la nouvelle judéophobie'

Introduction

Éliette Abécassis is one of the principal flagbearers, along with writers such as Karine Tuil, Marc Weitzmann, Laurent Sagalovitsch and Émilie Frèche, of a nascent contemporary Jewish-French literature. Abécassis's work tends to display seven principal themes: (1) religion, (2) the precariousness and instability of human relations, (3) the condition of women, (4) Sephardi–Ashkenazi relations, (5) the memory of Jewish life in North Africa, especially in Morocco, (6) antisemitism and anti-Zionism and (7) Israel and Palestine. In some of her novels, only a subset of these themes is treated, while in others the entire range is present. Her recent novelistic writing, which includes *Sépharade* (2009), in which the main character of *Alyah* is first introduced, displays a similar set

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of preoccupations as those found in Jewish-American literature, namely the preoccupation with the interplay between traditional Jewish life and modern secular life (for example, the figure of the 'Jewish mother' appears in *Sépharade* in ironic descriptions of traditional family life and in *Alyah* in a more sober light, which we shall discuss later in the article).

In *Alyah*, Abécassis tells the story of Esther Vidal who, like the author, is a French-Jewish teacher of Moroccan descent. There are a few indications in the novel that Esther is a vehicle, or at least a sounding-board, for some of Abécassis's concerns. For example, when a student asks her to explain what a character means, Esther replies that 'Le personnage, c'est ce qui vous ressemble. Le personnage n'est pas tout à fait vous; mais il est vous en plus … grand, gros, intelligent, bête, gentil, méchant, en colère, déprimé' (2015: 77). Indeed, when asked by an interviewer if Esther is Abécassis, the author replied 'oui, Esther est mon double littéraire' (Ousset-Krief, 2016). Thus, the novel tells of Esther's and Abécassis's growing discomfort in an antisemitic France where Jews are increasingly targeted by Islamist terrorists and where French leaders are plagued by political lethargy. As more and more Jews, including her friends, leave France for Israel, Esther wonders if she ought to make her *aliyah* as well.[1] The novel ends with her still in France, but already looking towards a future departure. *Alyah* is not a novel that immediately and clearly foregrounds Jewish–Muslim relations, but gives an indirect message about these intergroup relations. There are no major Muslim characters in the novel and the only (present-day) Muslims ever mentioned are terrorists or extremists. Thus, on the one hand, the novel portrays the Muslim population of France monolithically as dangerous to Jews. On the other hand, the novel also harks back to the 'Islamic' Golden Age, the *Convivencia* in Spain, and the recent period of coexistence between Jews and Muslims in Morocco in order to show that things were not always as they are now. Taken as a whole, *Alyah* is an extended meditation on the future of Jewish life in France at a time when Jews are perceived to be menaced by terrorists, the larger Muslim population and the media.

The kippah affair and crypto-Judaism

The novel begins with Esther Vidal bringing her children to school on the metro. During their ride, her son suddenly asks her the difference between a public school and a Jewish school. Esther immediately feels self-conscious, thinking that people are watching them. She tells her son to be quiet. Her daughter asks why they attend a Jewish school, while their mother teaches at a public school. Esther is horrified that her children have revealed their Jewishness to everyone around them. Once they leave the metro, Esther tells her children that, in future, they must never speak about being Jewish in public:

> Quand nous prenons le métro, nous ne devons pas faire allusion au fait que nous sommes juifs. C'est la même chose dans le bus, les taxis et dans tous les transports en commun. C'est également valable dans les cinémas, les magasins, les parcs et les jardins. C'est bien compris? (2015: 10)

The very first scene of the novel, then, serves to underscore the importance of being discreet if one is Jewish in France. One should not bring attention to one's Jewishness anywhere in a public space. One may recall here comedians Élie Kakou and Élie Semoun in their famous 'Vous êtes juif?' sketch, in which Madame Sarfati, a stereotypical elderly Sephardi woman, meets a young Jewish man on the train and, suspecting he is Jewish, tries to get him to admit his Jewishness, to his great chagrin and reluctance. The young man is depicted as highly embarrassed, worried what other people in the train might think, and wishing simply to be allowed to blend in with the others in peace. In effect, Esther is telling her children that they must be like the young man on the train and avoid being like Madame Sarfati. They must become, as it were, crypto-Jews, an injunction that resurfaces later in the novel through references to marranos.

In addition to suggesting a return in contemporary France to more troubled times in Europe where Jews had to outwardly hide their Jewishness, this scene also references contemporary debates in France on the wearing of the kippah. Following an attack on a Jewish teacher in January 2016, the president of the Consistoire israélite de Marseille, Zvi Ammar, urged Jews not to wear the kippah 'jusqu'à des jours meilleurs' because being discreet in the present climate might save their lives and 'la vie est plus sacrée que tout autre critère' (Europe1, 2016). Zvi Ammar's comments provoked heated debate in the French public sphere, especially among French Jews themselves. The cartoonist Joann Sfar, for example, posted on Instagram cartoons mocking Ammar's comments (*Le Monde*, 2016). The president of the Conseil Représentatif des Institutions juives de France (CRIF), Roger Cukierman, denounced Ammar's comments by saying that 'un tel renoncement, c'est donner la victoire aux djihadistes. Il est important que chacun puisse vivre sa judéité comme il l'entend' (*L'Express*, 2016). Other community leaders, such as Michèle Teboul, the president of the Marseille branch of the CRIF, were less categorical. Teboul agreed with Cukierman that individuals ought not to give in to fear and ought to continue to live normally, but at the same time added that she could not oppose Ammar's decision 'si c'est pour assurer la sécurité des juifs' (Le Cain, 2016). Nevertheless, the majority of community leaders, such as Haïm Korsia and Joël Mergui, joined Cukierman in opposing the idea that Jews ought to 'be discreet' in order to be safe (*L'Express*, 2016).

However, one regrets that Abécassis fails to seize upon the similarities (and differences) between the kippah affair and the various 'affaires du foulard'. Indeed, there is a common framework underlying these debates over the public display of religious symbols. This framework is French Republican universalism, sometimes referred to as 'le pacte républicain' in France. This Republican universalism is enshrined in the French constitution and legal system and states that all French citizens are equal and must not be distinguished by ethnic, religious, linguistic or any other particular differences. Beyond its legal manifestation, Joseph McGonagle (2017) has convincingly demonstrated, through an analysis of contemporary French visual culture, the extent to which French Republican universalism remains the dominant political ideology in various spheres of French society. Scholars of contemporary France have interrogated the tension between this abstract, though noble, ideal and the failure of the model to address concrete inequalities between French citizens and foreigners living in France (Wieviorka, 1997; Schor, 2001; Hargreaves, 2015). French Republican universalism is often seen as either unable to address or, worse, as exacerbating the very ethnic- or religious-based discrimination from which it seeks to protect its citizens. The wearing of the kippah or the hijab, being markers of ethno-religious difference, can be perceived within the Republican universalist model not only as falling foul of *laïcité*, but also as being an indicator of communitarianism and a rejection of assimilation. It is within this universalist framework that both the kippah affair and the *affaires du foulard* have played out (even if wearing a kippah is often perceived as less ostentatious than wearing an Islamic headscarf in France).

These kippah debates, however, do not represent a uniquely recent phenomenon in France: they are also suggestive of a resurgence of an old theme that dates back long before the advent of French Republican universalism. For centuries, being discreet, described by terms such as crypto-Jews, marranos, New Catholics, assimilationists, etc., was a matter of survival for Jews in Europe. However, the decimation of the previously predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish community during the Holocaust and the subsequent rejuvenation of the Jewish community by the arrival of Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian Jews in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the transformation of post-war Western European societies, has brought about a reconfiguration of the models of French Jewish identity and culture:

> Jewish immigrants from North Africa changed the cultural style of French Jewish life as well as the nature of French Jewish identity. The more assertive style of Jewishness that they introduced into the public

> culture of French Jewry was reinforced by the Six Day War of 1967, by developments in French politics and society, and by a number of antisemitic incidents that aroused concern among a broad spectrum of French Jewry. (Hyman, 1998: 197).

This 'more assertive style' could take a number of different forms. One could, for example, assert one's Jewishness through the visible display of religiosity or through the making of specific political claims in the public sphere. Regarding the latter group, Dominique Schnapper in *Juifs et Israélites* (1980) identified a new group of 'militant' Jews who took two distinct sets of positions in the public sphere on the questions of Israel and Zionism. One set involved supporting the Zionist project and the State of Israel as a haven for Jews historically persecuted over millennia, while the other evoked their Jewishness as an obligation to oppose Israeli policy and support the Palestinians. Precursors of the likes of Judith Butler in her *Parting Ways* (2013), these French Jews saw solidarity with the Palestinians as an obligation rooted in the Jewish tradition of siding with the oppressed. Despite ideological differences, these were all signs of an increased willingness to reject the discretion that their antecedents had been obliged to adopt. Nevertheless, as Schnapper notes, the assimilationist Jews who were reluctant to display outward signs of Jewishness, like their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century forebears, still existed, though occupying increasingly marginal positions within Jewish society.

In recent years, however, discretion, as in the kippah affair, is being touted as a necessity in the present socio-political context. The assimilationist, invisible, discreet model of Jewish life is, once again, being prescribed by some as the solution to the problem of targeted violence and intimidations against Jews in France. Indeed, when a BBC reporter went to Marseille to talk to local Jews about the kippah affair, he discovered that many Jews had already been following Ammar's advice. Students at a Jewish school told the reporter that they were told by their parents to either remove their kippah or wear a baseball cap in public. Parents waiting to pick up their children told the reporter of their anxiety: 'Every day I have the same gut fear … It was never like this before. But now when I wave to the children on their way to school with their father, I feel the wrench in my stomach' (Schofield, 2016). Like these parents interviewed by the BBC, Esther, too, worries for her children's safety in what they perceive to be an increasingly regressive France. The first scene of *Alyah*, then, aims to individualise an experience and a debate that is currently resurgent in France. Indeed, Esther recounts how she had always wondered 'pourquoi les Juifs ne sont-ils pas partis à temps d'Allemagne, alors que tant de signes inquiétants auraient dû les alerter?' (Abécassis, 2015: 15). Though she does not explicitly state this, Esther is implicitly asking whether there are already enough 'signes inquiétants' today that ought to warn the Jews of France that it is time to leave. The sentiment that antisemitism in France, indeed in Europe, is at its worst since the time of the Nazis is not limited to this novel. This same claim has been made over and over again in the French public sphere since at least the beginning of the second intifada. In *Alyah*, this question is often brought to the forefront and, though dissenting voices are presented, in the end the novel suggests that indeed French Jews are indeed traversing a period that is reminiscent of, though not analogous to, the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

The memory of fleeting golden age(s)

Another important theme in the novel is the nostalgia for a vanished idealised past. Before bringing up the memory of peaceful and harmonious relations between Jews and Muslims, Esther insists upon the fact that her ancestors, including her parents who were born and raised in Morocco before leaving for France, have been a part and parcel of 'les pays arabes' (2015: 16). She then notes that, during her trips to Morocco, she had conversations with merchants about the departure of the Jews

from the country, an event that they told her they regretted. Her parents would tell her that life in Morocco was good. Esther notes that Jews and Muslims not only lived there in peace, but were both essentially one people. Esther's claim that 'nous étions le même peuple' is underpinned not only by the fact of sharing the same language, values, history and land, but also by the memory of shared foods and odours ('nous avions la même cuisine', 'nous aimions le même thé à la menthe'). It is not by chance that she resorts to an olfactory and gustatory vocabulary when discussing the shared history of Jews and Muslims in North Africa. Indeed, tastes and smells are vectors of memory (Waskul et al., 2009). Esther herself is aware of this, calling her parent's mint tea their Proustian *madeleine* (Abécassis, 2015: 86). Through mint tea, Esther's parents remember their earlier life in Morocco, as well as the good relations they had with Muslims. For Esther, there is no direct memory of Morocco or positive relations with Moroccan Muslims and so the shared cuisine and shared smells do not transport her to the past. Rather, for Esther, smells and tastes are important because they are a tangible reminder of the previous closeness between Jews and Muslims. Affirming that 'we' had the same foods, the same smells, etc. is a way to insist that, despite the difficulties of the present, Jewish–Muslim relations are not always already doomed.

Yet even in these lines a dose of reality is present. After all, most of the passage is in the past tense ('nous nous aimions', 'nous parlions la même langue', 'nous avions les mêmes familles', 'nous étions le même peuple', 'nous avions la même cuisine', 'nous aimions le même thé à la menthe'). Only two sentences in the passage are in the present tense ('Nous sommes semblables. Nous sommes encore si bien avec eux, chez eux, chez nous, dans cette exubérante hospitalité qui nous liait naguère'). How should one interpret this particular use of the past and present tenses? The suggestion is that shared aspects of Jewish and Muslim life in Morocco is a thing of the past. While 'we were the same people', 'we' no longer are. While 'we spoke the same language', 'we' no longer do. All that remains is the memory of these past commonalities. But the fact that Esther nevertheless claims that 'we' are still similar, that 'we' are still 'si bien avec eux, chez eux, chez nous', adds another layer to the equation. It is not simply the case that Jews and Muslims in Morocco used to be close and now no longer are, but that the reason why this is the case is that there are very few Jews left in Morocco. Esther is suggesting that if there were still a sizeable Jewish population in Morocco, perhaps it would still be like old times. After all, during her visits there, she notes, in the present tense, that 'we' still get along with 'them' on what is described both as 'chez eux' and 'chez nous'. In this way, Esther is recalling the past closeness of Jews and Muslims in Morocco to argue that the current tense relations between Jews and Muslims in France is not a natural outcome of already poisoned relations, but a result of a set of particular contingent socio-political circumstances.

Esther proceeds to evoke an 'âge d'or où les trois religions cohabitaient'. Immediately, however, she asserts that this golden age was 'juste avant le désastre' (2015: 17). Having established the basis for Jewish–Muslim solidarity in recent shared sensorial, cultural and historical similarities in Morocco, Esther evokes the 'Islamic' golden age during which Jews thrived, thus rooting this solidarity in an ancient past. But she very quickly reveals that this golden age did not last and that Jews became the common enemy of both Catholics and Muslims. Her description of the series of disasters which followed the golden age displays, in microcosm, the entire logic of *Alyah*: Jews and Muslims may not be essentially opposed to each other, but over history, even during the best of times, Jews have found themselves the target of both Muslim and Catholic violence and harassment. If they were not targeted with physical violence, it was a symbolic violence that was imposed on them, dictating, for example, the types of clothing they had to wear. The solution in the past, in the case of Inquisition-era Jews in Iberia, was to become marranos. The central question of *Alyah* is, as in the kippah affair, whether Jews ought now once again to become marranos.

Later in the novel, Esther retraces the history of her parents because, as she says, she is unable to tell her own story without telling that of her parents. The importance of genealogy and descent is present throughout the novel and suggests that Esther's sense of self-identity is predicated on being able to root her present in her ancestors' past. Esther begins the story of her parents by noting that she was born in Strasbourg to Sephardi parents. This, according to Esther, was an 'anomaly' that resulted in a series of oxymorons that defined her personality: 'calme et impulsive, réservée et passionnée, distante et chaleureuse, rationaliste et sentimentale, cartésienne et intuitive' (2015: 79). Why is being born in Strasbourg to Sephardi parents considered an anomaly? Perhaps Esther thinks this because the history of the Jews in Alsace has been dominated by Ashkenazim and not Sephardim, even if in recent decades the percentage of Sephardim has increased, despite still not forming a majority. Thus Esther considers the fact of being of Sephardi heritage and being born in a land long settled by Ashkenazim as the reason for the mix of Sephardi and Ashkenazi stereotypes in her character. By grounding her Frenchness in her Jewish heritage, she is at once possesses the calm, reserved, distant, rationalist and Cartesian disposition of the Ashkenazi and the impulsiveness, passion, warmth and intuitiveness of the Sephardi. This peculiar use of racialised stereotypes of Ashkenazim and Sephardim is less a reflection of Esther's true views of the two Jewish communities than a reflection of her still ongoing search for identity. Esther clings on to these stereotypes and attempts to fuse them together in order to create for herself a meaningful and coherent identity in a France where she feels increasingly solitary. This is one explanation for both her strong interest in her ancestry and her attachment to various Jewish stereotypes, which in this case she adopts uncritically. At the same time, she asks if her parents were really immigrants because 'ils sont tellement français que je ne sais plus, et eux-mêmes, je crois l'ont oublié' (2015: 79). Their Frenchness allows Esther not only to make the claim that her Frenchness resulted from her birth in France, but also that it was passed down to her from her parents. This preoccupation with proving her Frenchness is another theme that recurs in the novel. Towards the end, Esther will discover that her earliest ancestors had come to France right after the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which then offers the final proof to Esther that she is truly French. The most probable explanation for her constant and consistent preoccupation with her origins is that she has been made to feel less French, less Republican, less universal in contemporary France due to her Jewishness, which she tries to downplay and to be discreet about in order to pass as just French. Finally, however, towards the end of the novel, her discovery about her ancestors allows her to claim her Jewishness and her Frenchness at the same time.

For the moment, however, it is a more recent family history, that of her parents, that Esther unveils (2015: 81). Esther is careful to highlight that her parents had left 'their country'. Instead of saying that they had left Morocco, Esther is keen to emphasise that the land that her parents left was one that was theirs and that had been theirs for generations. Yet they had to leave in haste because of the increasingly volatile relations between Jews and Arabs. Esther indicates that these volatile relations had concrete and devastating consequences by citing the 1954 Massacre de Petit-Jean. But Esther also mentions that, while this was the post-war reality, Jewish–Arab relations were 'plutôt paisibles auparavant'. Earlier in the novel, Esther discusses the danger of Islamism and Muslims in contemporary France before implicitly arguing that these contemporary issues are neither essential nor unavoidable by bringing up an earlier history of peaceful relations. Here, too, Esther is arguing that the exodus of Jews in the post-war period cannot be reduced to unavoidable, essential differences between Jews and Muslims by highlighting a period when relations were 'plutôt paisibles'. Nevertheless, just as when she proceeded to provide a dose of reality to her earlier claims, here too Esther admits that during the times of 'plutôt paisibles' relations, Jewish life in Muslim-ruled lands was not without problems. Indeed, Esther points to the status of dhimmitude under which Jews had to accept 'la

domination de l'islam' in order to live there. Jews 'n'avaient pas le droit de porter d'arme, de construire des nouvelles synagogues, de se déplacer à cheval, et ils devaient se vêtir différemment des musulmans' (2015: 82). This symbolic violence, which also included having different names, not being able to take on certain jobs, and having houses lower in height than their Muslim neighbours, was also accompanied by occasional physical violence: 'De temps en temps, il y avait des flambées de violence dans les mellahs où les Juifs s'étaient enfermés eux-mêmes.' Most of the time, however, Esther notes that life for Jews in Muslim lands was liveable and 'certains y ont prospéré' (2015: 82).

Despite this relative 'prosperity' in the past, Esther is keen to note that, in the present, there remains very little trace of better times for Jews in Morocco. When Esther describes the old Jewish quarter as 'délabré, laissé à l'abandon, avec ses murs qui s'effondrent comme des lambeaux, dans la vétusté et la saleté', it is not only the physical space that is being described, but also the memory of Jews in the Moroccan collective imaginary (2015: 83–4). With this in mind, Esther wonders if, in the future, there will remain nothing but a few ruins to serve as a reminder that there once existed a large community of Jews in France. This thought worries Esther, but she is able to find solace by reasoning that exile is as Jewish a tradition as there is: 'L'aventure juive se construit, d'arrachement en enracinement' (2015: 84). Throughout the novel, what gives Esther a sense of continuity and coherence, that is to say two key elements of stable self-identity, is the rooting of the difficulties and worries that she faces in a longer tradition of past Jews. But there is a major problem that Esther still faces. Those nomadic Jews who left their lands did so in order to be able to retain their Jewishness and not be forced to convert or assimilate. Esther, however, does not share the position of these nomadic Jews. Rather, the first scene suggests that Esther has become a marrano like her parents who 'pratiquaient la religion chez eux, et dehors ils étaient comme tout le monde' (2015: 86). She is at once conscious and ashamed of this (2015: 18). For Esther, the fact of following in the footsteps of the marranos is filled with shame. She states that marrano means 'porc' and 'juif caché' and therefore concludes that there is something shameful and dirty about being an outwardly discreet Jew.

In the present, Esther identifies herself with the shameful marranos who converted or were forced to convert to Christianity, while still practising Judaism at home. This identification causes her shame, but she is unable to see another option in a France where she feels increasingly scorned and under attack and where she fears for her children at their Jewish school. In the past, it was not with the marranos who stayed and converted (whether for real or only outwardly) that she identified, but with the Jews who left their countries in order to be able to continue practising and transmitting their culture and traditions (2015: 20). After all, Esther is aware that her family fled from Spain to Morocco, and then finally from Morocco to France. This, in Esther's eyes, was something to be proud of. But now, in the present, she has chosen the path of the marranos and feels ashamed.

Islamist terrorism and French Jews

Another major theme of the novel is a sense of being perpetually under the threat of Islamist terrorism in France. Esther mentions the January 2015 terrorist attacks against the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* for their cartoons representing Muhammed, which were considered to be blasphemous, and against a kosher supermarket at the Porte de Vincennes in Paris. Her brief description of the events stresses that the journalists were killed because they drew blasphemous cartoons of Muhammed, while the Jews were killed simply because they were Jewish. Preceding the January 2015 attacks, Esther recalls the 2012 Toulouse attacks as well as the murder of Ilan Halimi in 2006. All of this places Esther in a state of constant anxiety:

> La vie m'est devenue absurde. Je ne sais pas de quoi le lendemain sera fait. Je me prépare. À quoi? Je ne sais pas au juste. Je suis sur le qui-vive. Je fais attention. À qui? Je ne sais pas … Nous retrouvons cette espèce de saleté, de haine de soi, comme si nous mettions de vieux habits que l'on avait entassés dans la cave. (2015 : 21–2)

Once again, Esther evokes the concept of Marranism as being a response to the current climate for Jews in France. The figure of the marrano appears here as an 'espèce de saleté, de haine de soi' and the return of Marranism as the act of putting on 'de vieux habits' that had been shed and left aside. Esther's vocabulary displays the contempt and shame that she feels for Marranism, but at the same time she (along with other Jews) is heading down this path again in search of security. After all, Esther perceives the threat against Jews as not merely stemming from a fringe group of Islamist terrorists. The danger is no longer emanating from the state, although the state is held guilty of complacency ('il n'y a pas d'antisémitisme d'État, mais il y a eu un laisser-faire coupable et inquiétant'), but from a particular group of people within the French population (2015: 121). Esther notes, for example, that the Toulouse terrorist became 'un héros dans certains quartiers' (2015: 122). Which *quartiers*? She does not say, but, from the general thrust of the novel, one can imagine that she means those districts in the *redoutables banlieues* with a high percentage of Muslims. The mothers interviewed in the BBC article mentioned above also cited a fear of 'women covered head to foot in veils' and 'the new generation [of Muslims who] are … brought up to hate us' (Schofield, 2016). Aside from Islamist terrorists and a general fear of Muslims, Esther also cites a particular brand of left-wing pro-Palestinian activism that she believes is mostly motivated by antisemitism. During one anti-Israel protest, Esther notes hearing chants of 'À mort les Juifs' (Abécassis, 2015: 23). She also briefly describes witnessing a group of pro-Palestinian protestors attempting to attack a synagogue while declaring their intention of killing Jews. This event in fact really did take place in Paris on 13 July 2014. While not every pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli protest in France ends up becoming violent, most of them do display openly antisemitic themes, from both the organisers and the participants. For example, on 1 April 2016, EuroPalestine, the same group that arranged the 2014 protest, organised another protest calling for the 'séparation du CRIF et de l'État'. Given that the CRIF is the major umbrella organisation of French Jewish groups and seeks to represent French Jews, the protester's call to separate CRIF from the state repeats the old antisemitic trope that Jews are somehow in control and manipulate things in their favour to the detriment of non-Jews. In addition, the inability or unwillingness of politicians to address the problem of antisemitism (besides grandiose proclamations, from Manuel Valls for example, that France is not France without the Jews) adds to the feeling of precariousness for Jews in contemporary France, who still bear the collective memory of their ancestors being led to their deaths. This, in a nutshell, is what underpins Esther's Marranism and her subsequent shame for not taking on a more assertive and empowered posture in the face of these external threats.

Esther's twenty-first-century Marranism involves not making any mention or showing any sign of Jewishness or Judaism in public and passing herself off as just another French person. In Esther's opinion, the ideal would be to have blonde hair and blue eyes, like her friend Gabrielle, whose children also study at the Jewish school where she is a French teacher: 'Avec ses yeux bleus et ses cheveux blonds savamment décoiffés, je me dis que Gabrielle, au moins, passe inaperçue dans le métro … Avec son mari, ils forment la parfaite famille de blonds. Ceux qui ne se trompent jamais. Ceux à qui on rêve de ressembler' (2015: 27). With blonde hair and blue eyes, one is completely off the radar, but still not completely off the hook.

After dropping off their children, Gabrielle and Esther have a coffee at the bistro opposite the school. Esther notes that the position of the bistro is ideal for them to monitor the school and watch over their children:

> Je resterais là toute la journée si je pouvais, telle la caricature de la mère angoissée dans laquelle la situation me projette. Peut-être, après tout, sommes-nous devenues des mères juives par la force des choses, et par le développement de l'instinct de protection contre tous les dangers, depuis des millénaires. (2015: 25)

Esther invokes the (sexist) stereotype of the nagging, overprotective, guilt-inducing Jewish mother and turns it on its head by suggesting that the stereotype actually developed as the result of generation after generation of mothers having to protect their offspring from the uncountable dangers that Jews have had to face for millennia. Thus from the more recent comical stereotypes of the overbearing Jewish mother, such as in Dan Greenburg's *How to Be a Jewish Mother* (1964) or Woody Allen's hovering-in-the-sky Jewish mother in *Oedipus Wrecks* (1989), Esther returns to the earlier figure of the stoic, courageous Jewish mother who is compelled by her circumstances to be strong and determined, such as the mother figure in the classic Yiddish folksong 'A Yiddishe Mame'. One can interpret Esther's comments as seeking to add nuance to the caricature of the Jewish mother developed principally by male writers in the 1960s. In this respect, Esther (or rather Abécassis) is following in the footsteps of a series of feminist women authors who have sought to appropriate and complicate the figure of the Jewish mother (Jong, 1973; Friedling, 1996; Fishman, 1998; Dufour, 2000; Antler, 2008).

The loneliness of French Jews

So far, we have highlighted the major themes of this novel, all of which are presented within the first 30 pages: (1) the rise of antisemitism, (2) Marranism or discretion, (3) the threat of Islamic terrorism and the fear of Muslims, (4) nostalgia for better times, and (5) the position of the (Jewish) mother in the current climate. In the rest of the novel, these five themes intersect with each other at length and in detail before culminating in Esther increasingly looking towards making her *aliyah* to Israel. Since the founding of Israel in 1948, encouraging and facilitating the *aliyah* of diaspora Jews to Israel has been a primary preoccupation of successive Israeli governments. Against the backdrop of a recent resurgence of antisemitic acts in France, various Israeli politicians, such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, have aggressively sought to convince French Jews to leave France for Israel. Additionally, the Israeli government actively seeks to encourage *aliyah* in numerous countries, including France, through extensive marketing campaigns, *aliyah* fairs, etc. Jewish immigration to Israel is, of course, the core of the Zionist project. It bears mentioning that the concept of leaving the diaspora to settle in *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, predates modern Zionism and is part of the Jewish religious tradition. The first part of the title of this article refers to a phrase that is often sung during Passover and Yom Kippur and reflects the religious significance of returning to *Eretz Yisrael*. However, it is neither the Zionist ideal nor a sense of the religious that appears to drive French *olim*.[2] A 2015 study from the Institut français d'opinion publique (IFOP) suggests that the primary reason French Jews immigrate to Israel is the perception that Jews are no longer safe in France.

In Esther's case, it is indeed mainly the experience of antisemitism that pushes her to consider making her *aliyah*. The sharpest and most intimate examples of antisemitism occur in Esther's classroom during a series of scenes in which she faces considerable trouble with her students, the majority of whom are suggested to be Muslim, at a public high school in Argenteuil in a *zone d'éducation prioritaire* (a socially disadvantaged area). During one scene in class, one of the students asks her suddenly if she is Jewish ('feuj'). Esther does not reply immediately and the question is repeated more aggressively. Esther remains silent and wonders, not how they arrived at this point, but rather how they had not arrived here earlier: 'Nous y voilà, j'avais réussi à éviter ce genre

de questions, je ne sais pas par quel miracle. Peut-être en contournant tous les thèmes pouvant se rapprocher, de près ou de loin, à la question du judaïsme' (Abécassis, 2015: 94). Esther finally responds by asking the student in question what his problem is, to which he replies, 'parce que si vous être feuj, ça veut dire que vous êtes sioniste!' (2015: 95). This comment unleashes a torrent of remarks from the other students:

– Elle est sioniste! On va lui faire la peau! murmure un autre.
– Moi les feujs, ça ne me dérange pas, le problème c'est les sionistes.
– Hitler avait raison, il faut tuer tous les sionistes.
– Et les Juifs aussi.
– C'est la même chose!
– Ouais c'est vrai! Ils tuent nos frères les Palestiniens!
– On va tous leur faire la peau.
– Mohammed Merah n'a pas terminé son travail!

(2015: 95).

The problem of antisemitism and of the difficulty of teaching the Holocaust in French schools, especially in a *zone d'éducation prioritaire*, is indeed an attested problem, even if it must be acknowledged that the media often exaggerate the extent and intensity of the problem. Nevertheless, our goal here is not to evaluate how representative the scene is, but to examine the reason why Abécassis includes it in her novel. Esther is overwhelmed by the students' harassment and is unable to control the situation. Luckily for her, the *conseiller principal d'éducation* (CPE) walks in and attempts to set the students straight. But the students do not back down and call the CPE 'un agent sioniste'. The fact that the CPE's name is Rachida is no doubt an important choice made by Abécassis. In naming her Rachida, and thus suggesting that she is from an Arab-Muslim background, Abécassis is making two points. First, the prejudices held by Esther's students cannot be generalised to all Muslims in France. Second, as in Aomar Boum's *Memories of Absence* (2013), younger Muslims are depicted as more influenced by the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and more ready to conflate Israel with Jews in France, while older Muslims may be more sympathetic to Jews, especially if they are old enough to have been their neighbours in North Africa before the various waves of Jewish flight. Despite Rachida's efforts, Esther's students persist in their antisemitic rhetoric, which indexes old tropes, including ritual murder and blood libel ('ils tuent nos enfants'), controlling the world ('ils dominent tout'), greed ('ils ont beaucoup d'argent'), and the perception of being everywhere ('ils sont partout). In an attempt to point out to the students that they have taken positions on something that they do not even understand, Rachida asks the class to show her on a map where Israel is located. But their ignorance of the geographical location of this country that they hate so much does not lead them to pause and take a step back. Rather, they suggest that it does not matter that they do not know where Israel is located because Israel is the country of the Jews and the Jews are everywhere. When Rachida asks them if they even know what 'Jews' mean, they reply 'c'est ceux qui assassinent les enfants palestiniens' (2015: 96). Thus, for these young (presumably Muslim) students, Jews everywhere in the world are guilty of killing Palestinian children, and of controlling the world, being greedy, etc., and therefore represent legitimate targets.

Later on in the novel, there is another classroom scene during which Esther's students once again question her on her Jewishness:

– Mais m'dame, il l'a quand même bien mérité, *Charlie*!
– M'dame, vous avez entendu ce qu'Israël a fait aux Palestiniens? C'est pas du respect, ça!
– C'est pas juste, m'dame. Vous pouvez pas cautionner ça, si vous voulez le respect.

– C'est vrai, m'dame, vous pouvez pas cautionner ça!
– M'dame, c'est vrai que vous êtes juive?

(2015: 146–7)

Esther breaks her silence and reveals that she is not only Jewish, but also 'marocaine, alsacienne, espagnole, berbère, et française comme vous'. Esther refuses to be defined solely by her Jewishness and cites her various other ancestral identities as well as her 'mille autres vies', which refer to the roles that she plays, i.e. teacher, mother, citizen, etc. In the face of accusations of being responsible for 'ce qu'Israël a fait aux Palestiniens' because of her Jewishness, Esther multiplies her identities in order to argue that she is an individual who cannot be pre-defined by the stereotypes linked to one of her salient identities.

What is the significance of these two episodes in the logic of this novel? Given that the book already insists upon the solitary and precarious life of Jews in France, due to the constant threat of terrorist attacks and harassment, these episodes suggest the significance of symbolic verbal violence against Jews. Not only do they run the risk of being targeted at their places of worship or at community centres, or simply for being visibly Jewish on the street, there is also a banalisation of antisemitism in public schools, especially among young Muslims in France. In *Alyah*, apart from Rachida, the only Muslim characters, Esther's students, are depicted as unbending, but also unthinking, antisemites. But not only do they display antisemitism, they also display an affinity for terrorism and solidarity with the terrorists. This may seem unbelievable, but there have been numerous, albeit sensationalised, reports in the media of an active minority of students in public schools who have made similar comments. However, the difference between the alleged reality of the problem and the representation of the problem in this novel is that in reality it is, at most, a *minority* of students who behave like this, while in the novel it is suggested to be almost the *entirety* of (Muslim) students. In this way, Abécassis suggests that, despite past harmonious Jewish–Muslim relations and even present possibilities for solidarity as embodied by Rachida, the majority of Muslim youth, whose own marginalisation carries more importance in the public sphere, especially on the political left, than that of the Jews, have become so tainted by the disease of antisemitism that the future may not hold much promise for Jews in France, which is why, towards the end of the novel, Esther suggests that in ten years' time she may no longer be in France.

Indeed, it is not only the physical threat of violence from Islamists that worries Esther, although that is a primary worry that she has for herself and her children (2015: 98–9) The scene in the classroom serves as a vivid example of the concrete consequences of the banalisation of the antisemitic discourse that Esther perceives as being propagated by the media. In Esther's opinion, the media relay one-sided antisemitic propaganda about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and because (a part of) the population conflate Jews and Israel, this results in problems for the Jewish community. In effect, Esther is stating that words are not just words, but also actions. Media coverage of a group of individuals can effectively influence the opinions that the broader public have of that group, and these opinions can, in turn, affect people's behaviour towards those of the group in question. However, this begs the question of whether French media really are antisemitic or biased against Israel. It is clear that, as a whole, contemporary French media is nothing like Édouard Drumont's late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century antisemitic newspaper *La Libre Parole*. If anything, it is anti-Muslim rhetoric that is currently more prevalent and normalised in the French media (Kunst et al., 2013). Esther's second point, however, is more of a possibility, with a number of studies demonstrating a markedly anti-Israel bias in French media (Blanchard, 2003; Finkielkraut, 2005; Bourdon, 2007; Taguieff, 2008, 2010). Esther goes on to state that the key to understanding the recent attacks against Jews in France lies in 'la communication' (Abécassis,

2015: 99). This is to say that Esther fully blames the media as complicit in the rise of antisemitism and the violence that this has brought to bear on the Jewish population. She asks why Associated Press has more journalists for Israel and the Palestinian territories than for China, Russia, India and the whole of sub-Saharan Africa put together. She asks why the media are so focused on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which took the lives of 42 people in 2013, when that is approximately the homicide rate per month in Chicago. It is perhaps revealing, however, that Esther cites the death toll in 2013 and not in 2014, which was the year of the seven-week Operation Protective Edge during which 1,462 Palestinian civilians and five Israeli civilians were killed. The 2014 statistic, of course, would not have fitted Esther's narrative, which is to argue that, while worse events take place in the world, the media are focused disproportionately on Israel. Yet despite Esther's intention of claiming that the anti-Israel bias in the media is a result of antisemitism, it is more likely that this bias is a result of a French media tendency to treat the underdog as the victim. For example, during the 1948 and 1967 wars, French media coverage was actually more favourable towards Israel at a time when the country was perceived as a small, weak, new country of Holocaust survivors surrounded by large Arab countries. After the 1967 war, however, the evidence of Israel's strength was clear and after that the French media began to progressively adopt a more favourable stance towards the Palestinians (Bourdon, 2012). In any case, beyond the question of whether or not Esther's comments are factual, it is more important for our purposes to understand the role of these claims in the logic of this novel. As with the earlier classroom scene, Esther's comments about the media should be read in the overall context of an increase in antisemitic hate crimes and hate speech that has led to a sense of insecurity and what one commentator has called the 'loneliness of French Jews' (Schimmel, 2016).

'La nouvelle judéophobie'

It is during the second part of the book that Esther decides to take action. She joins a small group of French Jews who begin a series of meetings to come up with a plan to tackle the antisemitism they face. While most of the members of the group believe that antisemitism is currently a major problem, one of the members, Stéphane, who is described as feeling more French than Jewish, 'ne croit pas à la puissance de l'antisémitisme qui, pour lui, n'est qu'un épiphénomène' (Abécassis, 2015: 101). Stéphane, we are told, only comes to the meetings out of friendship for the two main organisers, Éric and Maurice. The discussions that take place in this group reference broader societal debates over antisemitism and anti-Zionism in France. Stéphane, for example, represents the position of Alain Badiou and Éric Hazan (2011) who deny that there has been an increase in antisemitic acts since the 2000s (all the while admitting that there have been notable incidents of antisemitism). For Stéphane, Badiou and Hazan, more than any actual phenomenon of unparalleled antisemitism, there has been a heightened atmosphere of paranoia around the subject. The other members of the group, on the other hand, represent the position of someone like Alvin Rosenfeld, for example, who does not oppose 'vigorous discussion of Israeli policies and actions', but considers that the 'ubiquitous rubric "criticism of Israel" … designates another kind of discourse' (Rosenfeld, 2016: 59). Specifically, he writes that those who operate under this rubric are 'typically less interested in critically examining particular Israeli policies than in questioning the very idea of a Jewish state and its right to a future' (2016: 60). According to Rosenfeld, these instances of anti-Zionist discourse transform Israel into 'a monster state' (2016: 62). Thus, anti-Zionism becomes a particularly virulent form of antisemitism. The other members of the group also echo the conclusions of Pierre-André Taguieff's *La Nouvelle Judéophobie* (2002). In this book, Taguieff carefully documents continuities between the old antisemitism and the new antisemitism, which he calls 'la nouvelle judéophobie'. He focuses on how the new antisemitism, in rebranding itself as

anti-Zionist, still makes use of familiar antisemitic tropes. Various forms of this arguments have also been made by a number of academics and writers, such as Georges Elia Sarfati (2002), Alan Dershowitz (2003), Alain Finkielkraut (2003), Shmuel Trigano (2003), Phyllis Chesler (2004), Elhanan Yakira (2009), Bruno Chaouat (2010, 2013), Clemens Heni (2012) and Maurice Samuels (2016). Some of them, such as Finkielkraut, Dershowitz and Chesler, also suggest that the new antisemitism that masquerades as anti-Zionism is in part a result of the alliance between the left and Islamists. This particular point is one that is explicitly mentioned by the members of the group as a major problem regarding antisemitism in France.

It is important to bear in mind that in the novel Stéphane's position is presented as less valid than that of the others for a number of reasons: (1) he has never been to Israel, (2) he does not go to the synagogue, and (3) he presents himself as more French than Jewish, does not bear visible signs of Jewishness and thus has never personally experienced antisemitism (Abécassis, 2015: 114–15). At the end of the novel, Stéphane decides to leave Paris for London because he has realised his error in thinking that antisemitism in France is not significant. The emblem of the assimilated Jew, Stéphane realises that no matter how French he might feel, he will still be perceived as a Jew and that Jewish life in France no longer has any future: 'Je pensais que j'étais français et là, soudain, j'ai compris que je n'étais qu'un Juif de France. Il n'y a plus rien à faire ici, il faut partir. Il faut se sauver. Tout est perdu' (2015: 230). This sudden change of heart is supposed to have the effect of 'proving' that indeed it is the positions of Taguieff and company that are correct and not those of Badiou and company.

Stéphane is not the only person in the novel to decide to leave France due to the perception of rising antisemitism. Gabrielle, Esther's blonde, blue-eyed Jewish friend whom she envied for being among 'ceux qui ne se trompent jamais', also decides to leave France (2015: 27). Instead of London, however, Gabrielle decides to make her *aliyah* to Israel and settle in Tel-Aviv with her family (2015: 170). Immigrating to Israel is constantly on Esther's mind, but at the same time she feels a strong connection with France and she is unable to imagine leaving: 'Je n'arrive pas à me voir ici, dans dix ans et, pourtant, je n'arrive pas à m'imaginer ailleurs' (2015: 233). What further anchors her to France is her discovery towards the end of the novel that her earliest recorded ancestors had left Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago and settled in what would later become France. This discovery provides her with a legitimacy that she did not feel she had before and therefore leaves her with a sense of euphoria:

> La France coulait dans nos veines depuis plus de deux mille ans! … J'étais française. Il n'y avait même pas plus française que moi. Qui pouvait dater l'origine de sa famille de l'an soixante-dix sur notre sol? … J'étais fière d'appartenir à cette nation qui avait apporté ces idéaux [de liberté, fraternité, égalité] au monde. La France a toujours lutté contre la barbarie, la servitude, l'infamie. (2015: 209)

There is a stark contrast between this scene of discovery and the classroom scene where she declares her multiple identities. Gone is her declaration of being 'juive, marocaine, alsacienne, espagnole, berbère, et française' (2015: 147). Now, she is just French. Not only is she just French, Esther now asserts that no one is more French than she is. So proud, or rather relieved, is she at this discovery that she adopts a nationalist posture towards the French nation. Esther is now, all of a sudden, proud of being part of the nation of liberty, equality and fraternity, which 'a toujours lutté contre la barbarie, la servitude, l'infamie'. From seeing France (not only its Muslim citizens) as a deeply antisemitic country, with a government that is too lethargic to combat antisemitism, and with a history of persecution of Jews, Esther now claims that France has always fought against 'la barbarie, la servitude, l'infamie'. How do we explain this transformation? Why has Esther suddenly decided to overlook the long history of the opposite of fighting against barbary, servitude and

infamy in France? Esther's discovery compels her to adopt all aspects of stereotypical, nationalist Frenchness as an antidote for her marrano-tainted, shameful Jewishness. Stéphane, who used to consider himself more French than Jewish, may have finally decided to leave France, and Gabrielle, who looks more stereotypically 'French' than 'Jewish', may have decided to make her *aliyah* to Israel, but now Esther, who considered herself more Jewish than French and who looks more stereotypically 'Jewish' than 'French', has found a way to combine Stéphane's and Gabrielle's positions in society in order to go beyond being a marrano and to become a converso, in the hope that eventually, with sufficient nationalism, she will cease to be converso and become just like 'everyone else'.

But this sense of Frenchness does not last long. Esther accompanies Gabrielle to the airport where she is to take a plane to Tel-Aviv to rejoin her husband and children who are already there. Inside the airport, in front of the El Al counter, a pro-Palestinian protest is taking place, with a crowd chanting anti-Israel slogans. A young man suddenly takes an Israeli flag out of his bag and begins to wave it in the direction of the crowd. The image of one solitary man, described as frail and only armed with a flag, standing up to an angry crowd resonates with Esther:

> C'est David contre Goliath … Le David de Michel-Ange représente le peuple juif car il est mince, bien que musclé, il n'a pas l'air aussi fort et imposant que son Moïse. Il a cette expression triste dans le regard, comme s'il avait été obligé de se battre alors qu'il cherchait la paix, lui qui est berger. Les Juifs et les nazis, Israël contre les pays arabes, les Juifs contre les Arabes, les Juifs en France, Ilan Halimi contre le gang: David contre Goliath. Depuis toujours nous sommes condamnés à nous battre contre un géant, et obligés de le faire par des moyens détournés, parce qu'il est plus fort, plus puissant que nous. (2015 : 236–7).

Seeing the young man stand up to a crowd of protesters who are described as 'rabid' wakes Esther out of her French nationalist reverie and reminds her that in the end, like Stéphane, she is only a Jew and it is the fate of Jews to be forced to fight 'alors qu'il[s] cherchai[en]t la paix'. She places all iterations of this fate – 'les Juifs et les nazis, Israël contre les pays arabes, les Juifs contre les Arabes, les Juifs en France, Ilan Halimi contre le gang' – as being cases of David versus Goliath. In all the examples she provides, except the one of the Nazis, all the Goliaths are Arabs or Muslims. In this way, the novel comes to a close with the reproduction of an oppositional, conflictual binary of Jews versus Muslims – something that Maud Mandel has aptly termed a 'narrative of polarisation' (2014: 2)

Conclusion

Although at various moments the novel emphasises a history of peaceful relations between Jews and Muslims, *Alyah* ends with a sense of despair. Despite nostalgia and past relations, the present and the future appear dire. Thus, the very last lines of *Alyah* has Julien, a romantic partner of Esther's, ask her why she is crying, to which she says 'dans dix ans, je ne serai plus en France'. Julien's reply is that, in that case, 'dans dix ans, ce ne sera plus la France' (2015: 243). The ending is certainly a reference to Manuel Valls's declaration after the January 2015 convenience store attack that 'sans les Juifs de France, la France ne serait pas la France' (*Le Point*, 2015) and perhaps also a reference to an old Moroccan saying: 'A market without Jews is like bread without salt' (Boum, 2013: 14). To conclude, *Alyah* comprises a series of reflections on a pressing contemporary question for French Jews: to remain in France as potential crypto-Jews or leave the country as exiles? In reproducing the 'narrative of polarisation' between Jews and Muslims in contemporary France, Abécassis suggests that the latter option will eventually be preferable.

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Notes

1 *Aliyah* refers to the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel.
2 *Olim* is the plural form of *oleh*, which refers to someone who has made *aliyah*.

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