Delphine Horvilleur, the 'Reformed' French Rabbi Making Waves

[00:00:00] **Delphine:** People were asking me about antisemitism in France and they were telling me. This would never happen in America, and I understand it like the feeling by many American Jews that they were somehow protected, that what was happening in the phenomenon that was happening of a rising anti antisemitism in Europe, and especially in France, would never happen in America.

We know today that it's not the case. It's as if actually France had more or less. 20 years in advance in the phenomenon. Something that happens pretty much everywhere now.

[00:00:37] **Lisa:** Hello and welcome to Hadassah Magazine Present, a brand new podcast for those who *love Hadassah Magazine* and want more. And for those who have never heard of the magazine and are looking for stimulating conversations with acclaim, Jewish authors, thinkers, celebrities, and culinary stars. I'm your host, Lisa Hostein, the Executive Editor of *Hadassah Magazine*.

I'm so delighted to be in conversation today with Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, one of France's handful of female rabbis, an author, and the inspiration behind the HBO Max Series *Reformed*. If you haven't yet binged, you must. I've always believed that it's important for American Jews to connect with and try to get the perspectives of Jews in other parts of the world, including but also beyond Israel.

And with Delphine as our guest today, we have the rare opportunity to get a glimpse into French Jewry, which has the largest Jewish population in Europe, and the third largest in the world. As well as into her personal journey as a rabbi, author, and public intellectual. Delphine is the author of the recent bestseller, *How Isn't It Going? Conversations after October 7* and the Award-Winning *Living With Our Dead*, the 2021 book on which the *Reformed* series is

loosely based. After completing her rabbinical studies in ordination in 2008 at the Reform of Movements to Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, Delphine returned to France and became one of the leaders of the country's liberal Jewish movement.

She also is the editor-in-chief of *Tenua*, a French publication of Jewish Thought and Culture. That has expanded to include regular study and dialogue sessions. The New York Times has called her the rare public intellectual to bring religious texts into the public square and French L Magazine, which put her on their cover, said she finds the right words to describe our time and our ghosts.

Welcome to fi. I'm so delighted to have you with us.

[00:02:31] **Delphine:** Thank you so much for this invitation. I'm delighted to be with you.

[00:02:35] **Lisa:** So you're not one of those rabbis who knew as a child from an early age that the rabbi, it was your calling, but rather your route to rabbinical school, like a lot of people, in fact was a little unusual.

You have talked about how you left the religion before you came back to it. Tell us a little about that journey, including your brief soldier and studying medicine at Hadassah Hebrew University Medical College, and what ultimately inspired you to become a rabbi.

[00:02:59] **Delphine:** Well, it's indeed a long, um, path. I grew up in France in my family.

There is a rabbinic history. My grandfather studied to become a rabbi. Then he decided not to be a rabbi. But it was for me, a very important role model. And I grew up in a more traditional Judaism, uh, what we call in French Cons historian, which is kind of orthodoxism, I guess, or modern orthodox orthodoxism.

I grew up being. Very, very involved in Jewish life in a traditional family, but obviously I never thought of becoming a rabbi because there were no options for me in France of, uh, becoming a rabbi as a woman. Then I moved to Israel when I was 17, uh, alone. And at the time I was convinced I wanted to be a doctor, a physician.

So I joined the medical program at, at Hadassah. I spent a few years there. At the time, if you would've told me that I would want to become a rabbi, I would

probably have, uh, laughed because I was very, very away from, um, practice and tradition, maybe because. I felt that Israel, in a way was my Jewish expression.

My Zionism was my Jewish expression, and I was quite away from this endeavor in this quest. And I moved back to France in special time. It was after Robin's assassination. Um, a moment in history that really, really changed me in many ways. And then I became a journalist. In France, but this is the moment I started to study more and more, but again, studying more and more Bible and Talmud and Ra.

I faced a very interesting phenomenon that every time I would knock on a door of a, of a study house in France, I would get the same answer. People would tell me, wave classes, alud classes, but not for you. Not for you as a woman. So this is when someone told me, maybe you should move to the states to study, maybe join a program.

So one day I moved to the United States, but it was supposed to be a, to be a three months program. Isha in New York. And that moment was for me, a huge moment of, um, I could even say kind of Mount Sinai moment. Suddenly I discovered progressive Judaism, reform conservative American Judaism, and it opened my eyes to something I was looking for, but I was totally unable to name.

You know, it's interesting that sometimes, you know something deep, deep inside. But there is no way you can formulate that will, you don't have the right words. And suddenly it became doable. And one day, I remember exactly that day, I was sitting in New York with a colleague of mine. I mean, I was not yet rabbi student, but um, a reform rabbi in New York told me, well, with such a path and your interest in the text, why don't you become a rabbi?

I thought it was a joke, so I started to laugh. My friend didn't laugh, and this moment, you know, it's weird, but I understood it could be not a joke, like it could be serious and everything came into place. It's as if the different pieces are a, a puzzle, like a life puzzle, but also geography, puzzle and a cultural puzzle came together and I joined the rabbinic program.

[00:06:20] **Lisa:** It's a wonderful story, a wonderful story. I think everybody has their moment. By then, it was fairly commonplace already for women in America to become rabbis. And of course, you know, we actually had a program not that long ago celebrating the 50th anniversary, but it's still, as you

well know, and I well know from my rabbi friends that it wasn't always an easy path.

And certainly the early pioneers struggled a lot, and now they're even orthodox. Women who are rabbis in the United States, and I understand one in France as well. But tell me in France now that you went back and you became very involved in the liberal movement, but how big is that liberal movement in France and to what extent are you still struggling to be accepted in the wider Jewish and larger society as a rabbi?

[00:07:04] **Delphine:** Well, when I moved back to France, it was 2008, I really felt that it was not only a journey, uh, in space, but I was, it was a journey in time. I was coming from the states indeed, as you said, from a space, especially New York, uh, where it felt quite normalized for women to become rabbis. I remember on the day of my ordination, May, 2008, I think 18 rabbis were ordained at Hebrew Union College on that day.

Nine men and nine women. So it was quite symbolic that we were in perfect equality of numbers and I moved back to Paris. Actually, it was obvious for me that I wanted to ma move back to Paris, even though I knew it would be more difficult, more complex. But I really wanna be a, wanted to be able to bring back to my culture.

My nation, my background, something that I had been missing. I felt I had a duty to try to bring something that as a young Jewish woman growing up in France, I never encountered and suddenly I felt I had a responsibility to try to bring it back. So I was ordained. I moved back to Paris, and indeed it was a journey.

In time because I felt I was back on issue. That probably in the states were totally resolved already, like ancient problems. I had to demonstrate constantly that I had the legitimacy, the possibility, the knowledge to be a rabbi. Even in my congregation when I moved back were only at the time two, uh, actually three women, rabbi, then we were again, two women rabbi in France.

The first one was pull in bed, was ordained. In 1990 in London and she has a congregation in Paris and I moved back to a congregation that had been led from the beginning by only men. And I felt that even inside my congregation at the beginning, it was quite, uh, complex. I constantly had to prove myself to be in this fight that I know many of you who listen now are aware of.

And, um, it took a few years then. Things really changed for me when I started to publish a lot to publish articles and books and I became, I don't know how to say it otherwise, like a medi metic figure. Suddenly I was invited by the media and by also the politicians, uh, by the public realing here in France.

So in a way I gained legitimacy a lot from the outside. Not from, you know, it studied not from inside the Jewish world, but I felt that I gained legitimacy and recognition that in a way put pressure on the Jewish community to recognize that in a way I. I was existing as a woman rabbi, and it was possible, it became obvious and I feel now that obviously in my congregation for years now, people, I mean, I've recognized that I'm their leader.

A new generation has grown now, and it's quite interesting when, you know, um, I remember after a few years in my congregation, I noticed that for the kids in my congregation, it was so obvious for them. That the rabbi was a woman that even at some point, I remember a very funny event. I was organizing children's services in my congregation and one day there was.

This little boy, he was like four or five years old. He came to me at the end of service and he said, rabbi, rabbi, oh, you know, I would've loved so much myself to become a rabbi, but I can't. I'm a little boy. And Robert was so cute because I understood that actually this is how you change your culture. You change your culture, not not through.

Words or theories, but most of the time through modeling something, you know, and people get used to just a new setting, new background, new models of leadership. But indeed, to answer your question, it's still, I can say an, an anomaly in France, the huge majority of French jury goes to, uh, synagogues that are identified.

The Orthodox centralized movement, it doesn't mean that those Jews are orthodox, neither in their practice or their belief, but most of the time the only synagogue they know. Is the synagogue that has an Orthodox rabbi because there are still very few liberal synagogues in France, very few in Paris here, and there are few in large cities in France.

But it's still, um, perceived a lot as a kind of, um, still, I mean, it's growing and growing. People know it exists, but it's still perceived as a little bit on the side and you constantly need to prove legitimacy. It has a lot to do and maybe, I don't know, people are interested in this, like the structure of French juries very specific.

Historically, there is a chief rabbi and an organization called COIs that was um, uh, installed in France two centuries ago and created. A kind of anti pluralistic model. It created like a central authority of Fism. That right now is orthodox in its sensibility. In a way, it prevents true pluralism to be recognized because if you have a central authority with the chief rabbi.

We know this situation also in England and in Israel, of course, but it's all started in France actually. We are responsible for that because Napoleon created two centuries ago a central structure with one represented at the top, the chief Rabbi, and in a way, if I can say. This is not very Jewish. There is a very central notion in Jewish philosophy of Malo like disagreement between the uh, sensibilities.

This is when you read Alud, you're pretty aware that people disagree constantly and fight with each other. But the structure that was created by Napoleon prevented what I think is a healthy. A healthy discussion to to take place, and very often non-Orthodox movement need to prove constantly that they're legitimate to exist.

[00:13:15] **Lisa:** It's very parallel to even what goes on in Israel today. I mean, there's more growth and there might be people from the reform movement who might take issue with what I'm saying, but we still know that it's a challenge and the numbers are growing, but small and clearly in terms of recognition by the Chief Ravens.

So it really does seem to be like a parallel situation there.

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So some of those challenges are reflected in the series reform. So I really do wanna talk about that and I do hope that much of our audience has seen it and I highly recommend it if, if they haven't. So, in Hadassah Magazine, one of our

writers described the series as a quirky and charming dramedy. About a newly ordained liberal Rabbi valiantly serving the small Jewish community in the pics city of Strasbourg in eastern France.

Each episode follows the young rabbi as she officiates at major lifecycle events, weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs, and circumcision that correspond with thought provoking moments in her personal life and her relationship with her family. So tell us how that series came about, because it says clearly in the credits that this is based on your book.

Um, and how much of it actually reflects you and your experiences? That's the key question.

[00:15:16] **Delphine:** Yeah, it's a key question indeed, because as you can imagine since the, the theory was released, a lot of people think that the story is truly about me, uh, when in fact it's, it's quite far away above from the book and from I think my character, I think.

The, the character of the young Rabbi in the series is, uh, very nice and, and charming. But I think I, I, I'm very far away even in, in my rabbinet and my leadership to, to what she does. So it's, it's interesting because very often now in France, people will watch the show say, hi, I didn't know you were from Strasbourg.

And I keep saying, I'm not from Strasbourg. It's, it's a show. And then people ask me, I didn't know. Your father was a psychoanalyst. I said, oh, my father is not a psychoanalyst. It's the show. It's a fiction. So it's interesting, this confusion is constantly at play. So the story about the, the theory is that the book Living With Our Dead in French Vi Nomar, um, became very.

Quick in France to my big surprise, actually a huge bestseller. So the book became years ago, really a, an important bestseller here in France. It was translated to many, many languages around the world, but um, but in France it had a huge impact, much, much beyond the Jewish community. In in recent years, and for me it's always a very striking and moving thing.

People tell me that they read the book and it accompanied their grieving and mourning processes. Even people told me that they went to funerals, non-Jewish funerals where. Chapters of the book were read as if it was a kind of secular liturgy, which is for me, very striking and surprising. But it played a specific role in, I think in France.

So for many people in recent years in a non-religious country, as you know, France is very secular as a country. So the book was a success. And then many, many people started to tell me they wanted to adapt it to a movie or a series. And for me it was a difficult thought because the book, for those of you who maybe read it, is based on true stories.

And it was very difficult for me to take this decision that I would expose real people's life and grief to a screen. I mean, basically people who accompanied in their mourning processes, and I tell in the book about their stories, they agreed for me to write their stories, but they never asked to be characters in a movie.

I was not very comfortable with the idea of adapting the movie. And then came a team, uh, then the group, HBO adapted. But then at first it was a team of screenwriters and they told me, we wanna adapt your book, but unfaithfully we wanna take some distance from the book, write something about a female rabbi.

That wouldn't be you, but we would use a lot of your teachings. And it would be a book about. Her life and the challenges she faces and, and I loved the idea that they would, in a way be both faithful and unfaithful to the book. And I think they really managed to do it because for me, for example, one condition in the adaptation of the book was that it was really important for me that the theory would be filled.

Jewish knowledge, relationship to the text, Jewish thought, and I think, I mean, that's my option. I think I'm quite objective because I wasn't part of the process of building the series, but I think that the, the, the series is quite successful in the way it keeps a very strong rabbinic knowledge and a relationship to the text and the tradition.

In each episode, you dive into mid or Bible or Talmudic situation. And it was very important for me that it would remain very rabbinic and it'll deal in a way also with many types of grief or grieving process. Not necessarily death, by the way, but I think the series is filled with questions of how do you.

Deal with what you lose in life and, and the fact that the character is not full of dogma as a lot of doubts. Well, I could recognize myself in this element that I think in my rabbinet, when people turn to me and want an answer, I very often tell them that if they're looking for answers, I'm not the right rabbi.

There are many rabbis that will give them answers, but I share sh. Questions and I can help them redefine the questions and help them. Maybe they will find their own answer, but I'm not gonna be the one who will provide them with a

definite answer. And in this way, I guess I'm not very orthodox in my practice or in my, you know, way I turn to the rabbinet.

But I think in the series it's quite well kept this idea.

[00:20:03] **Lisa:** So. The actor Elsa, she's wonderful. She's really, I don't know how, I'd like to know how you think she portrays a female rabbi, even if it's not you. And I guess the question is to what degree does she really portray a rabbi? And you talked about the fact that the tax and the knowledge is incorporated, and I think she does do that beautifully.

How much time did she spend with you to kind of prepare for this role?

[00:20:28] **Delphine:** So Elza, um, she was very serious. Student with me because for quite a while, for many months, she followed me. Pretty much everywhere. Each time I was leading like a funeral or a wedding, I would turn around and she would be there and I wouldn't even know she, she wasn't always shadowing me.

I guess that's the word. She was always in my shadow and looking for, not only for listening to what I was saying or teaching, but I think she learned a lot of. Gesture and, you know, the way to behave, how to put a on everything was very foreign for her 'cause she didn't grow up in a practicing Jewish family.

And, but she, she was really interested in learning the power of gesture and Jewish tradition acting. She had a lot of questions, always very intelligent questions. And I think she's doing a, a wonderful job in creating something that is. A little bit inspired by my teachings, but she really created something, uh, different.

You know, it was interesting that they tried in the Siri to emphasize the fact that she wasn't me by, I don't know if people notice, but a few times in the Siri I appear in the background. Like for example, uh, at some point she receives a couple that wanna gets married and she asks them. Why are you coming to me so late?

And they answer something really funny. They say, well, Avilar was supposed to marry us, but she dumped us at the last minute. So in a way, it's interesting that they managed to create different istic moments where it's clear that it's not me, even though it's inspired by the book. And I think it's interesting that she.

She incarnate something that gained power during the first season. You know, when I talked with the writers at the beginning, they were sending me the script and I was a bit bothered because at the beginning of the series, they like the first episodes in my, from my point of view, she's not good. Like she's doing a lot of mistakes.

She's doing things that. I would never do, and I was a bit annoyed that people would think that I would do something like this. For example, like I don't know if people remember in the first episode she's supposed to deal with the situation of a couple that doesn't, the father doesn't wanna do Bri, Mila to the son, and, and she really misses the point at the beginning.

She goes in a very wrong direction. At the beginning I told them, no, come on, she, she can't do something like this. I would never do or say something like this. And they were really clever. I mean, they told me, you know, she needs, in this first season. To grow. Grow, she needs to become to find confidence. And also I think it's very well done that from the first episode until the eighth episode of the first season, she's becoming a leader.

But it takes time at the beginning, she totally lacks confidence and I think at some point. She builds herself on this lack of confidence, which is something that I find very powerful generally in leadership, that you recognize that actually you cannot build yourself on your strength very often. You on the contrary, you need to build yourself on your faults, on what is missing in you, on what is uncomplete and broken, and I think this brokenness of our uncertainties.

At some point becomes exactly the strength of a rabbinet, and I thought it was very intelligent to create such a character. So what have you learned from her? She comforted me actually in this, um, in this reflection about what is leadership generally speaking, and what is rabbinic leadership as I see it.

You know, I notice that I very often teach. In the past years about who are the leaders in our tradition, and I never thought about it about myself, but you know, when you think about major leaders in the Bible, for example, like Abraham is barren part of his life. He can have no children in a society where it's really a blessing to bring children.

Uh, Isaac is blind part of his life and Jacob is limping and Moses is, uh. In English with stuttering. So I find it striking that actually all the major leaders in the Bible are people who have a handicap. They're not strong people. They're

people who doubt people. That when God turns to them constantly say, why me?

I'm not the right person. Why don't you turn to someone else? I mean, they are in this imposter syndrome or this feeling of uncompleted ness or this handicap situation that actually enables them to be in a leadership position. And I think it's quite interesting that it's almost a contrary to an intuitive, uh, thought we have.

We think that great leaders are people who have no doubt and they have certainties and they're strong. We think a lot about this in this political moment around the world where leaders appear to be very thorough. Uh, decided, uh, you know, people and, and actually the Bible teaches exactly the opposite.

True leaders are not that strong, but they are willing to deal with what is, uh, limping and broken in them.

[00:25:48] **Lisa:** See even here you're teaching us, which is beautiful. So one last question related to the series because it relates to you as well. So one of the storylines centers on Leia's relationship with her father and ev vowed atheist who just does not get her career choice.

So I'm curious to know how your own family felt about you becoming a rabbi.

[00:26:10] **Delphine:** Well, um, well. In a way it, it fits and doesn't fit my family story. Um, my, my parents, uh, were very happy with me becoming a physician. You know, I was studying at, at Dasa in Jerusalem. So I guess for Jewish parents, especially my Jewish mother, the idea of me becoming a, a doctor was, um, something we were very, very happy with when I announced them.

I'm quitting medical school. To become a journalist. Uh, they say it was okay. I mean, basically they supported me, but yeah, they, they, they got used to the idea. Then when I said, um, I'm not gonna be a journalist anymore and I'm going to rabbinical school, I. So it was a bit of a shock for them. You know, there is this ancient Jewish joke that says, I dunno if you translate well into English, that says that Rabbi is is not a job for Jews, you know, for a good Jewish boy, or even less for a good

[00:27:08] **Lisa:** Jewish, not a doctor or lawyer.

[00:27:10] **Delphine:** Yeah, exactly. So, so I guess it was a bit surprising for them. I mean, they knew, I was fascinated with, by Jewish text and Jewish study, they could understand the intellectual endeavor. But to become a rabbi was a bit much for them. So for a few years they were really surprised. But I guess they always supported me.

I the luck of being surrounded by me. A family that always, uh, accepted, I should say my achiness, my my crazy ideas. Now I think they're proud, I think of what I'm doing and this support. I think it's important to say that to an American audience. French society is a super secular society, so we tend to perceive, even among the Jewish community, inside the Jewish community, we tend to perceive faith and choosing a religious path.

As being something a bit weirdo, a bit, you know, disturbing. There is like a tradition of French intellectual life disconnected from belief in faith, and maybe there's certain level of snobbish, you know, I don't know, I don't know to, to say it in English, like a way to at least be a bit ambivalent about people who choose this path.

So I think it's very different. To become a rabbi in France that to become a rabbi in America. I even find it striking in when I listen to sermons by American Rabbis and by French rabbi. You will almost never hear a French rabbi in his or her sermons who use the word faith, because somehow in France. We tend to believe that this word faith is linked to the Christian religion.

We kind of disconnect from this kind of vocabulary even. Whereas I, I believe that for an American rabbi it's quite obvious because America is a religious, uh, society. Religion has a much more central role to play even politically. So we actually don't use the same words,

[00:29:12] **Lisa:** the same

[00:29:13] **Delphine:** vocabulary.

[00:29:14] **Lisa:** That's interesting.

That's

[00:29:15] **Delphine:** a topic as you can imagine that I'm really interested in. 'cause I believe that, um, language is, uh, sacred and I think if there is one religious tradition that acknowledges sacred level language is really Judaism.

[00:29:29] **Lisa:** That's interesting and I think there's a lot of discussion in this country that even though it's already has more faith in God language than in France, it still seems to be increasing dramatically and there's a lot of discussion and whether that's true in the Jewish community or not, that's issues that I think a lot of us are, are exploring and looking into.

Jewish writers are under attack thanks to the rampant antisemitism that seeped into the publishing world. More and more, they're being blacklisted and banned from publishing associations and literary events. Some publishers and agents are even refusing to read or consider anything by a Jewish author.

But you can support these writers. It's so easy to do. Yet so important. Hadassah is elevating and celebrating them in the pages of Hadassah Magazine and in episodes of the Hadassah Magazine Presents podcast in which we interview female authors about their Jewish theme books. We encourage you to read their work and listen to our interviews and join us as a member to support Aassa Magazine presents.

And all we are doing for Jewish writers at this time of crisis, at go.hadassah.org/podcast join. That's go.hadassah.org/podcast join. Thank you. So I really wanna get to your book because there's so much in there that's interesting. It's 11 chapters and a book opens with the funeral of Elsa Caat, the columnist and psychoanalyst who is massacred by Islamic extremists in 2015, along with 11 other, I believe, at the Paris Offices of the Satirical Magazine, Charlie Abdo.

So this was followed by, within a few days, a series of other terrorist attacks, including a siege. Kosher supermarket during which people were taken hostage in four people were murdered. So that was the beginning of an especially terrible time for France and French Jews in particular. It's been 10 years more than that since this surge in antisemitism has been happening.

That attack in 2015 sparked a record number of French Jews to leave France for Israel, I think was about 8,000 that year. And we know that thousands have continued to leave in the past decade. And between October 7th, 2023 and the end of June, 2024, there was a 233% increase among French Jews filing applications for Aliyah.

Of course, they didn't all make it. That's number's pretty significant. Both of your books really focus a lot on antisemitism in very meaningful ways, but I want you to give us a sense of what it's like for French juice now these days, and the degree to which things have changed since October 7th.

[00:32:16] **Delphine:** So first of all, I would go back to what you said.

I would correct one thing you said that things changed for us in 2015 Sha and the Ike, but actually it's not true. What changed in 2015 is the French acknowledgement of the threat not only for Jewish community, but for pretty much everybody around the Islamist threat in France or all around the world.

But for the French Jewish community, it started much earlier. I could even give some. Critical dates of turning moments. 2006, Ilan Almi, a young Parisian Jew is kidnapped and tortured and killed around Paris. It's a huge shock for the Jewish community, but also the shock is not only that it happened, but also the fact that.

The moment we really feel strongly how lonely we have. I remember myself walking in the streets of Paris 2006 in a demonstration in the memory of IMI looking around me and noticing that all the people who walk in the streets are Jews and I don't see anyone else. 2012 is another turning point. Very important one.

That's the terror attack in Tous. When children and their father, but children are killed in front of and inside a Jewish school in Tous in the south of France. Huge major shock in the Jewish community because you cannot imagine something worse like children killed point blank in a school and by a killer who pretends to avenge Palestinian children.

And another huge moment of loneliness. No demonstration is organized at that time. What should have brought millions of French citizens to the streets to protest seems to be, uh, a problem for the Jews, or at least there is no consciousness of national threats. So it takes a few years of Jewish loneliness and then comes.

2015, Shali Abdul and the Iche, and then millions of people are walking in the street joined by leaders all around the world. But for the Jews in France, there is a little music in their head, like a little melody. Terrible feeling in our heads is that if we wonder, basic question in 2015, if there had been only an attack at the I, would there be people in the street?

We know the answer. There wouldn't be, there was no one for Toul lose and were barely Jews walking in the street for Ilani. So actually for years, Jews in France have experienced very strong level of loneliness. It has a lot to do with the decision of some to move to Israel or to feel files of Aliyah, because actually

the numbers you gave are very difficult to define because many Jews took Israeli citizenship.

So they enter the statistics of becoming Israelis or making Aliyah, but I think many of them or either remained in France or moved to Israel and moved back. So it's very difficult to make any comments about those numbers. What is true is that the growing phenomenon is a lack of confidence of the ability of the French Republic to protect us.

At the time when I was a student in New York, in rabbinic school, I can't remember how many times in the States people were asking me about antisemitism in France and they were telling me this would never happen in America. I remember always this sentence, this feeling of, and I understand it, like the feeling by many American Jews, that they were somehow protected, that what was happening in the phenomenon that was happening of rising anti antisemitism in Europe, and especially in France, would never happen in America.

We know today that it's not the case. It's as if actually France had more or less 20 years in advance in the phenomenon. Something that happens pretty much everywhere now. So the situation that we experience now in France, actually, I'm not sure I have anything to teach you American, just because we are, you are pretty aware now of what we experience, uh, the feeling of loneliness.

Also tensions inside the Jewish community of how we should handle this. Uh, the feeling that we are now dealing also with this new situation of the anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism being constantly intertwined and connected. The issue with, uh, with words like, uh, uh, the question of the relationship with Israel, criticism of the government.

I mean, everything is linked, but I, I'm aware that what you experience in America is actually more or less with a few little difference, but more or less what we've been experiencing here for quite a while. I'm leading a, a large congregation in Paris. My congregation is about. 1500 families, uh, in two major synagogues in Paris.

At the end of the Hebrew school year, I always bring the kids and the parents together, and last year, in June, I took all the parents together, like hundreds of parents into a classroom, and I told them, okay, we are going for a difficult time. Does anyone want to share an antisemitic moment? A little one or a big one, or a meaningful one?

Maybe you and your family experienced, and I don't wanna be depressing, but I'm gonna be depressing. Believe it or not, each and every family, each and every family in my congregation had a story to tell. Sometimes it was a small story, sometimes it was a big story. Sometimes the story was that in the classroom, on one table, in their child, child class, there was a sica that when there was like a trip.

Journey with the class. One of the children started to sing a Nazi song out of nowhere that some children were, um, canceled or, uh, outed from WhatsApp group in the class because they were, they are Jews and supposedly support the killing of Palestinians. Each and every one of them had a story, and also what was striking is how much the kids, even from early age Jewish kids.

At integrated the threat give you, and I'm gonna give you an example that for me is very meaningful. When my children were very young, um, I would, for example, take a cab with them, a taxi in Paris to go to the synagogue. And at some point in the taxi, my children would say how we are going to the synagogue?

And I would have a weird and terrible reflex to tell them, speak lower. You know, be discreet. That would be the expression of my anxiety or my Jewish fear Jewish mother that was already present, I would say in 2010 when my children were really very little. Now, the testimonies that I get from parents is that when they speak about Judaism in the synagogue, the children tell them.

That's a huge difference. It means that from a very early age, children, Jewish children in Europe, I don't know if how much it's true in the States, and I guess it depends where in the states also, but in Europe, many children have integrated the threat and they associate their Jewish identity. Something that we'd rather be silent about and that's terrible, but this

[00:40:02] **Lisa:** is where we stand right

[00:40:03] **Lisa (2):** now.

[00:40:04] **Lisa:** Are you finding that as a result of that situation, October 7th and everything, uh. Related to that has increased connection that Jews have been coming to synagogue more. They're seeking their own community because they don't feel comfortable in the wider community. Yeah,

[00:40:22] **Delphine:** that's clear. In my synagogue, it's totally clear in what I'm doing.

The synagogue is, has never been. So field like when you come to a Friday night service at my synagogue, most of the time you will see like 300 people are joining all ages, many, many young people. And also I notice that many, many people organize Shabbat dinners more than ever, which. Tell something like, you see a lot of young people, students who uh, call me and they say, can you join us for Kidush because we organize a special Shabbat dinner and I know exactly what they're trying to do.

I mean, they need that space as what probably in America you would call a, a safe space to, to reunite even if sometimes if they fight with each other or disagree about. Practice or about Israel or their relationship to Israel. At least they feel that they are in those Shabbat dinner and at the synagogue in a place where it's okay to talk because many of them in universities and campuses, um, have as a way to protect themselves.

They somehow shut down. Any talk about those topics? I witnessed among many Jewish students, uh, in France, what I would call a process of, uh, Muranos. I don't know, you know, in the Jewish history, Muranos, they were like Jews who pretended to be something else and were, you know, hiding, especially in Spain and Portugal, the Jewish identity.

And I noticed that the same phenomenon happens like Jewish students, very Jewish, very from Jewish families when they are on campuses. Or they are with their friends. non-Jewish friends, they tend to lower the conversation or sh shut, you know, their identities and suddenly coming to Shabbat services and coming to Shabbat dinners is a way to breathe to find some oxygen.

I also notice because I lead a large, uh, bat mid rash here in Paris. With that, you mentioned before, we have a very large monthly be mid rash. And it developed in the way I would never have envisioned. I lead that Raj once a month, and we have approximately between four and 600 people every month studying Talmud and Mid with us, among them, many, many young people in their thirties.

And uh, and I think it, it says something about how much people owe. Looking for that connection in a times of threats. So now the question I think in our Jewish leadership, and it's question that is particularly relevant, I think for progressive leaders in Judaism, is how do we maintain teachings of universalism and openness in a time where for protection, people are closing their doors?

You know, there's always this tension in Judaism. Do you wanna be in a Judaism that builds. Bridges, or do you wanna be in a Judaism that build walls?

I'm pretty convinced that I, I wanna dedicate my rabbi. Bridge building business. But I have to admit that in a situation like ours, it's quite obvious and normal and understandable, that people also wanna strengthen the protective walls around their Jewish identity.

And the question me, as a Jewish leader is how do you reconcile these two existential needs to be in touch with the world and to maintain a universal teaching of our tradition? That can speak beyond that, reach out like the world of our synagogue, but how do we protect our children? I have no clear answer for that.

It's always like, I feel I'm constantly in this struggle right now.

[00:43:55] **Lisa:** Do you have hope for the future? I mean, what do you advise your congregants? Clearly the Tena program is living proudly and, and. Loudly as Jews, right? That is what we often talk about, that that's, that's one thing that we have to do that we can't hide even though it feels necessary to hide in many ways.

Well, that hope I, I would

[00:44:19] **Delphine:** say depends on days, sometimes on hours during the day. I believe that we are going through a very difficult time, not only. Because of antisemitism. But I, so I also feel that the political tensions inside the Jewish world create, um, binary. Is very, very difficult to handle. I feel inside the Jewish community, and I've experienced it particularly in recent months, how much there is tension between us.

Sometimes we feel that we don't understand each other anymore. We don't speak the same language and, and I really wonder as a rabbi, how I can be faithful to the values I truly believe in, but still remain committed to sense of. Belonging, uh, together. I think it's a super critical time in Jewish history.

I think it's really the challenge of our generations. Um, you know, it's, it's quite interesting that, as I said before, I feel that we are experiencing a political moment of, uh, strength of, uh, you know, we are around the world or growing leaders and leadership voices of, uh, power and strength, sometimes military strength.

I feel that Judaism has always taught something else, maybe naively, but you know, it's quite interesting that in Judaism we, when we get married, we break a glass. When Moses comes down of Mount Sinai and he breaks the tablet, when

we tell the story of the Exodus, we break a matsa. We are constantly emphasizing the ability to live with what is broken, to build, even though it's broken.

The temple and everything to actually, for me, Judaism is a teaching of living with the grief and managing to choose life, even though death and grief visited us. And sometimes I feel it's very difficult to reconcile this teaching of brokenness and grief in a time that emphasizes and choose so much. Uh.

Power and strength and completedness. It's the real challenge of, and it's gonna be the challenge of our generation and I, I'm afraid it's gonna be a very long and dark tunnel.

[00:46:42] **Lisa:** I know that you've gotten death threats and you've been attacked on social media and you're being stalked by certain people, and that's part of the phenomenon you're talking about.

But within, both within the Jewish community and outside the Jewish community, the anti-Zionists left and some of the people in the Jewish community who didn't like what you might've written about Israel and the call to end the war, and that is a phenomenon that a lot of people are, are experiencing right now.

[00:47:06] **Delphine:** I'm used to be attacked by the extreme left for years already. I was less used to be attacked by the right extreme right of our community. Um, and I, and, but I experienced it's, uh, you know, to be honest, I've never felt so Zionist and so in love with Israel. I, I lived in Israel many years. I'm very committed to Israel, very Zionist, and I feel that today my Zionism and my love of Israel.

To talk, but I guess that for part of our group and part of our people, love of Israel means silence. And for me. That Israel, love of Israel means the ability to talk and even to criticize out of love because this is what you do when you love, you talk and sometimes, sometimes you rebuke and you address criticism because it matters to you.

And right now I'm aware that part of our people out of trauma, and I'm not judging the trauma. We are all traumatized in a way, and we are talking through our traumatized psyche, let's say, but I feel that more than ever it's critical that we make sure that, just like in the story of Passover, that all the children are around the table, the sage and the rebel, and the one who doesn't know how to ask questions.

And the simple one, you know, this super classical mid rush of Passover. I think this is the story we need to, to implement again and again. There is no Jewish table if there is no room for all the children around the table. And I'm aware that some people are trying to make my voice or other voice being silent, and I decided I'm gonna be committed to this Jewish teaching again and again.

[00:48:56] **Lisa:** It's a sobering note that we're entering on, but those are the times that we live in. There's just a lot of troubles that we all have to wrestle with and what you talk about in terms of what's going on in France and that tension between universalism and Particularism and within the Jewish community.

We know that that's happened before too. In terms of, do you speak out if you feel strongly? Or do you remain silent? And that's part of who we are as Jews, I think, to a really large extent. Delphine, I wanna thank you so, so much for bringing your insight, your wisdom, your teaching, your passion. We really appreciate you being with us today.

Thank you so much. I wanna express my thanks to Libby Barnea, our deputy editor who helped plan and implement this program and to the magazine's digital editor, Ariel Kaplan, both promoted and produced it. And a shout out to our partners as always in the engagement and marketing and communication divisions who always play an important role in making these events happen and promoting them.

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