

Most of you know that Sharon and I spent nine days in France this past summer.

This trip was planned as a vacation, but also became a pilgrimage retracing the paths of some of our ancestral Jews in southern France.

Before this trip I knew virtually nothing about Provence.

What I did know was based upon my familiarity with Disney's film, Beauty and the Beast.

Provence served as an important center of Jewish life in 14th century France.

At that time, due to assassination threats in Rome, several popes lived in Avignon, a beautiful city which retains much of its ancient flavor.

The popes protected the Jews from the belligerent surrounding French kingdom, which expelled them under threat of forced conversion.

No Protestants, heretics, agnostics or atheists were permitted in the papal enclave -- only the Jews.

A huge, incredibly spacious, beautiful palace was built to serve as the residence for several popes.

We visited the palace for the better part of one morning.

But before we visited the palace, we went to the synagogue in Avignon.

It is in use today every weekend, with a rabbi from Marseille who leads the service.

It is one of four synagogues in Provence communities which were homes to the Jews who were offered protection by the Popes.

Jews -- seen as despised, homeless wanderers who had not recognized Christ as the messiah but had to be preserved as a people entrusted with the mission of bearing witness -- were tolerated.

They could survive but not thrive, mostly limited to three trades: secondhand textiles, used furniture and limited money lending.

Men had to wear a yellow badge of shame, to ensure no confusion with Christians, while women were obliged to sew a piece of yellow fabric onto their bonnets.

I am sure most of you have become aware that many Jews, most Jews, today feel unsafe to publicly display their Jewishness in France.

We remember the terrible terrorist attack in 2015 at the Hyper Cacher supermarket in Paris, shortly after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack.

We know that attack was not the beginning of fear tactics against Jews in an attempt to push them out of the country, an attempt that has worked.

Jews continue to leave France, the country with the third largest Jewish population, in record numbers.

I couldn't help but feel that what we were experiencing through our visits to the synagogues of Provence was a type of backwards déjà vu.

Back then, Jews needed and received special protection in order to serve the pope and at the same time practice their own religion.

Today, throughout France, Jews are feeling limited in being able to practice their own religion and live with a diminished sense of protection despite the visible presence of Government sponsored armed guards at synagogues, the Holocaust Museum and even in front of many kosher restaurants.

The presence of these armed guards made me feel even more threatened and alarmed because I knew their presence was not an overreaction.

It was and is necessary.

But many of our Jewish brothers and sisters feel it is not enough.

They know they have to hide.

One might say they are the modern day Marranos who privately practice Judaism.

Publicly, and out in the open, the practice of Judaism is almost invisible.

As you know, in this country, still, thank God, orthodox Jews visibly wear keepot and other articles of clothing which make them clearly and purposely identifiable as Jews.

On the way to France, and on the flight from Paris to Marseille, and on the flight from Marseille back to Paris, and on the flight home, and up and down the countryside in Provence, I saw no one, not one person I could clearly identify by his or her clothing, as a Jew.

Paris is the city with the 10th largest population in the world –

Yet Paris is home to many kosher restaurants.

When I tried to find a kosher restaurant near our hotel I googled, "kosher restaurants near me."

Four of them popped up on my screen as being within a mile of our hotel location.

Sharon and I went to a kosher restaurant called Kavod one night.

By 9 o'clock the restaurant was full and just about every man was wearing a keepah, in the restaurant, but not on the street.

Late Shabbat afternoon Sharon and I went for a walk to the Eiffel Tower.

On the way home we saw a young man wearing a small black keepah, who was otherwise dressed in indistinguishable clothing.

He was walking with a young lady who was either his girlfriend or young wife.

Before we traveled to France, I researched where we might go to synagogue by contacting my colleague and friend, Rabbi Robert Golub, who just retired from being the executive director of Mercaz, the Conservative movement political Zionist organization.

He has previously lived in France so I knew he would be a good resource.

We needed a synagogue where Sharon and I would be able to sit together so we attended a liberal synagogue only a mile from our hotel.

When I asked Rabbi Golub whether he thought it would be safe to walk in the streets of Paris, he said yes he thought so, but at the same time he suggested not to do so while wearing a visible keepah on my head.

And I did not do so.

And most everyone else did not as well.

I was afraid and I felt it would be dangerous to attract attention as a Jew.

How sad and disappointing.

Let me tell you about the synagogue in Carpentras, a Provence community which is home to the oldest synagogue in continual use in France.

There is a service now every Friday night and Shabbat morning.

A Rabbi comes only for Passover and HH.

The shul in Carpentras was built with two ovens. Why two?

The extra oven was used on Pesach.

Why wasn't the Synagogue destroyed by the Nazis?

The Jews said it was being used and needed as a mortuary.

So they actually brought corpses into the shul to make it appear so.

When we entered to visit the small sanctuary in the synagogue of Carpentras, there were about 25 people finishing up their own tour of the building.

This was a group from Israel and shortly after we joined them I heard the woman representing the synagogue say in English "we are not a museum, we are a synagogue."

I heard this not as a simple statement, but more of a battle cry, a declaration.

Don't come to this synagogue and think that all you are seeing are relics from the past.

This is our home, the home of the Jewish people in this community, and this home has continued to be used for hundreds of years.

It is our hope, our goal, and we hope it is our destiny that this home continues to be a site of holy study and worship for hundreds of years more.

We not only remember the past here, we also live in the present here, and prepare for the future here.

I feel the power in sharing these statements with you, but it will take even much more power and fortitude for this French Jewish community to continue in strength.

For much of our time in France, I worried that the seeds of another Holocaust were planted and visible all around us.

From what people tell me, and from my own limited experience, it is that way throughout most of Europe, only 72 years after the end of World War II.

There are two factors which make today's worldwide hatred of the Jews very different than in 1945, and neither has anything to do with the possibility that people generally like us more.

Not so - despite all of our contributions to the world we are not admired.

We are mostly despised, and that is because most other peoples are envious of all that we have accomplished despite our small numbers in the face of continual tremendous adversity.

That will not change.

What has changed is that in this country, the greatest country in the world, we have developed, consolidated and learned how to use our influence to better protect our interests here and in our nation's relationship with Israel.

But most of you probably know that while there is considerable support of Israel from our government, it is not what it once was, and even less so on college campuses, with mainline Protestants, and African-Americans.

It is not something we should take for granted.

The other major difference is Israel itself.

The French Jews have somewhere to go, a place that will take them in, and protect them and allow them to practice Judaism outside and inside.

This is why I am proud to speak to you on behalf of Israel bonds.

Not only is this a very solid, and smart investment – it is also a way to demonstrate support for our homeland, and for the land which will always provide us with a home.

I think we all know that had the state of Israel been in existence during World War II, it would've made a world of difference to millions of Jews.

It is not only in existence, it is strong, stable, providing assistance to Israel by investing in Israel bonds, not only makes sense, but is really an act of Jewish self preservation.

Let me conclude with an insight concerning the Torah readings for these two days of Rosh Hashanah, Genesis chapters 21 and 22.

We begin the new year and part of what we need to do is carve a path ahead for us to follow.

We want to better decipher where we need to go, and in order to do that, we need to better understand from where we have come.

That is why we read from the Torah on Rosh Hashanah about Abraham and Sarah, in the land we know as Israel.

They are our ancestors as Jews, in our homeland.

What they did, what they experienced, and what we learn from them, still provides shape and meaning to our lives today.

P. 100 in Machzor - And the first thing we read about on day one of Rosh Hashanah in Genesis 21 is the birth of a child, a boy named Isaac who connects with his father, loves his mother and emulates both of them.

And how do the Rosh Hashanah Torah readings conclude in Genesis Chapter 22?

P. 105 in the Machzor - with a genealogy, that introduces Rebecca.

Day one begins with the birth of Isaac, and day two ends with the birth of Rebecca, the first couple after Abraham and Sarah.

These readings not only recall the past.

They also help us look forward to the next generation who serve as the seed for the future for us and our people.

We are privileged to do so together not as a museum.

We are an active synagogue with a vibrant congregation of Jews proud of who we are as we continue to challenge the rest of the world to be a better place for all.