

From My Desk

It happened in August...

It was during the month of August that Napoleon Bonaparte created a path to help Jews assimilate into French society.

In April, 1806, Napoleon convened an Assembly of Jewish Notables. This group of prominent Jewish men was expected to answer 12 questions put to them by Napoleon and his advisors. The point of these questions was to help the French government decide whether or not Jews could be considered to be loyal to France, and therefore accepted as full citizens. This idea of testing the Jews stemmed from the fact that, Jews owe their primary loyalty to Torah- with its comprehensive legal and communal system. This has been the case, of course, throughout history. No king, emperor, or other ruler can supersede God's authority. No governmental laws or rules can supersede the Torah. Napoleon wanted to know, therefore, whether Jews could accept French government rule, and live, as equals, in French society.

Let's consider four of the 12 questions put to this assembly.

1. Is polygamy allowed among the Jews?
2. Is divorce recognized by the Jewish law?
3. Do Jews born in France consider it their native country? Are they bound to obey the laws and customs of the land?
4. What are the legal powers of the rabbis?

These, along with 8 other questions were submitted to this group of prominent Jews. Some of the questions could be easily answered. Questions 1 and 2, for example, were simple and straightforward. However, questions three and four (on this list) were not so simple. How, for example, would Jews explain their constant praying for their return to Zion - their actual native country - without suggesting they possessed dual loyalty? How

could they say that the rulings of the rabbis were never going to conflict with the rulings of France?

It required skill and diplomacy on the part of the notables to answer these and several more “tricky” questions. The head of the group was Rabbi Joseph David Sinzheim. On August 3rd, 1806, Rabbi Sinzheim submitted the answers to Napoleon and his advisors.

Several days later, the French authorities accepted their answers favorably. And, on August 15th, Rabbi Sinzheim delivered a Shabbat sermon in Paris’ main synagogue, in honor of the Emperor’s birthday. Napoleon was impressed and moved. Perhaps because of this sermon, and the favorable response of his advisors to the 12 answers, Napoleon Bonaparte shortly thereafter urged the creation of a “Great Sanhedrin” (which would be nicknamed “Napoleon’s Sanhedrin”) to implement the further integration of the Jews into French society.

This “Great Sanhedrin” modeled itself on the ancient Sanhedrin in several ways, thus directly connecting French Jews to our history. And, it implemented its answers to Napoleon by enacting nine laws that would govern French Jews in consonance with French sensibilities, thus ensuring that the French government would be satisfied with having Jews as citizens of their country.

While this period of friendship between Jews and France didn’t last even two full centuries (it dissolved in 1940 under the despicable Vichy government), it nevertheless allowed Jews to be a part of French society for about five generations. That period of grace began in the warm month of August, 1806.

As I write these words, just a few days before August, 2025, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Trump are working closely to deepen the ties between Israel, American Jewry and the United States government. Let’s pray they succeed in their vital mission of mutual cooperation and friendship. And, let’s

hope that the warm relationship that we American Jews currently have with the American government lasts long into the future.

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