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Belgian Battleground

Antwerp's postwar Jewish community enjoyed a charmed shtetl existence. That lifestyle was buffeted by the collapse of the diamond industry, but now the city's future is threatened by Belgium's new shechitah ban, as well as Islamic terror.

The problems facing Antwerp were the subject of this year's CER conference, and are a warning about the growing clash between Jewish communities and militant secularism in Europe and beyond

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PHOTOS Eli Itkin





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What do you get if you place Boro Park next to Manhattan

and add some European architectural flair, along with a threat to Jewish communal life?

Welcome to Antwerp, Belgium – a shtetl for the 21st century. It's a place where you can practically walk out of shul right into the city's main business district; where a rich, un-Americanized Yiddish is still spoken by all types of Jews; and where the bike rider you see is as likely to be a chassid as a hipster.

Antwerp may be a shtetl, but it's one under threat. As in much of Western Europe, an armed police presence is the new normal after the Islamic attacks of the last few years. And parnassah isn't what it used to be: The world-famous diamond bourse that once pumped wealth into the Jewish community has fallen on hard times. Diamond stores there are aplenty still, but the Klondike boom years are over, as Indians have muscled out Jews from their primacy in the world diamond trade. But a few months ago, a major blow fell as Belgium became the first Western country since the Nazi era to ban shechitah.

It was against that background that Antwerp played host to the Conference of European Rabbis' biennial meet-up. Bringing together hundreds of rabbanim, *dayanim*, and community leaders from across Europe, the CER convention has an AIPAC-like quality, hosting speakers ranging from Rav Asher Weiss, both Israeli chief rabbi, and White House anti-Semitism czar Elan Carr inside the hall; and politics, media events, and deals outside of it.

The official conference theme was the slightly anodyne "Torah versus contemporary challenges"; based on the hot-button issues actually raised, it might more usefully have been called "Torah clashes with secular society." From the Belgian shechitah ban and a scandal involving Jewish graves



NOT A JOB FOR A JEWISH BOY The loss of Antwerp's diamond trade has hit the Jewish community hard





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in Paris, to metastasizing European anti-Semitism, this was a seminar in managing the growing conflict between secular human rights-based systems and Jewish religious life. And although the setting was Antwerp and the problems European, Jewish issues are increasingly international in the 21st century. What happens in Hoboken, Antwerp, may sooner or later come to Hoboken, New Jersey.

Where Chassidim Ride Bikes The first thing that strikes a visitor to Antwerp – almost literally – are the bikes. Cities all over the world have become bike-friendly, but Antwerp is in another league. Intricate cycle routes complete with their own mini traffic lights cross the city, and swarms of bikers move everywhere. Antwerp's topography makes this possible – the city is as flat as the Dutch accent of the local Flemish dialect.

But Antwerp isn't just a biker's haven: It's a latter-day Roman Vishniac's paradise as well. Yiddish is still alive and well as an everyday language, even beyond the chassidic community: The bareheaded manager of the famous Kleinblatt's bakery directs me to "sheef" in a deliciously Galician accent. The sight of chassidim on quaint bikes framed by vintage trams and statues of Van Dyck and Rubens begs to be preserved for posterity in sepia.

And these are everyday sights. Whereas in New York religious Jews have to commute into the city for work, all Antwerp's Jews have to do is walk down the block – the Jewish community begins where the city's diamond bourse ends. And though you'd be hard-pressed to find chassidic mothers pushing strollers late at night down London's Oxford Street, here in Antwerp's Meir shopping district, that's not unusual. Having been a part of the city's life for

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“Up to now I’ve been able to ask those agitating against shechitah: Do you want to join Norway, whose shechitah ban dates to Nazi-era laws?”

— Shimon Cohen

hundreds of years (violently interrupted by the Holocaust), in their own low-key way, Jews are to Antwerp what they are to New York City: an integral part of the social landscape.

But Jewish life in this clean, postcard-perfect European city is under threat. Most obviously that comes from Islamic terror. The heavily-armed SWAT presence outside the Hilton that hosted the CER drew lots of attention, with comments on social media asking if there had been another terror attack. This was no overreaction; just down in the road in Brussels is Molenbeek, a neighborhood notorious across Europe as a jihadi factory, home to the killers who carried out the Paris and Brussels attacks.

And that’s just the old news. The conference focused on the latest threat to Jewish life in Europe: the recently passed Belgian law banning shechitah in the name of animal rights. Earlier, I had tried to get to the bottom of the story in phone calls to community leaders and local butchers, but people proved reluctant to talk. Here at the CER, the real story comes to light, and it’s a worrying one, because it may not be so easy to turn back the clock; a precedent has been set that will be used by enemies of shechitah everywhere.

According to Brussels’s Chief Rabbi Albert Guigul, who has been at the forefront of the CER’s engagement on the issue, the European Union is now the only hope.

“All sides of the political map voted against shechitah because of animal rights,” says Rabbi Guigul. “So there’s no political horizon — only a legal effort. We went to the Belgian high court and requested they strike down this law because it’s against our religious rights, but the court said they couldn’t decide and sent the case to the European Court for Human Rights [ECHR] in Luxembourg, which could take a year and a half to decide. In the meantime, we’ve asked that the law be held in abeyance so that we can continue shechitah. We hope to get an answer in a month on that.”

Reading between the lines of the conference, the Belgian shechitah ban is a story of a failed local lobbying effort with international implications. Belgium is divided into three regions — Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels — each with a high degree of autonomy. The regional parliaments clearly didn’t wake up one day and decide to ban shechitah. According to Shimon Cohen, campaign director

of Shechita UK, who’s been involved in lobbying for shechitah across the EU for decades, the Jewish community is collateral damage in a pushback against the local Muslim community.

“The story with Belgium begins a few years ago,” Cohen says on the sidelines of the conference, “when Muslim communities were celebrating Eid, and there was a lot of animal slaughter going on in stairwells and public places. The authorities said no more, and the Muslim community promised to put a stop to it, but the next year they did it again. Animal rights groups raised the issue in the Walloon parliament, and then parties from the left and right — including anti-immigration parties — voted for the bill.”

The question now before the ECHR, Cohen says, is whether there is a religious right to perform shechitah, or only to eat kosher meat. The European court has an unencouraging history on religious rights cases: It recently ruled that because of shechitah, a kosher chicken can’t be considered organic — despite the fact that it was raised in conditions identical to those of other premium organic poultry.

If the court decides there’s no fundamental right to shechitah, and cites





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the availability of tariff-free imports from neighboring France as evidence that the presumed right to eat kosher meat is not being impinged, the shechitah ban will stand, and with it a serious worldwide precedent.

"Up to now," says Shechita UK's Cohen, "I've been able to ask those agitating against shechitah what company they want to keep. Do you want to join Norway, whose shechitah ban dates to Nazi-era laws that were never repealed, or do you want to join Switzerland, whose 19th-century ban was designed to keep Jews out? That always produced red faces. But now there's a tier-one democracy which has banned shechitah on animal rights grounds."

Having pocketed this victory, animal rights groups could seek to ban the import of slaughtered meat as well.

"In fact, in the Swiss federal court, there's an early stage push to ban imports of foie gras," says Shimon Cohen. "Animal rights groups argue that since it's against the law to produce it, it should be illegal to import as well. That could have a knock-on effect for shechitah. We're working together with the Swiss and talking to animal rights groups on this one."

Antwerp's Jewish community enjoys broad access to local politicians, as a barnstorming pro-Israel speech by Mayor Bart de Wever showed. (He memorably noted that BDS protesters demonstrating against Israel's hosting of the Eurovision song contest agreed with many of the people in the CER convention hall, "although for different reasons," in a nod to his religious audience.) Noting that Antwerp had been a home for Jews for centuries, he said, "we need to find solutions to the latest issues." But with no one talking of rolling the shechitah law back in the local parliaments, hopes are pinned on the tender mercies of the EU, whose massive presence knits together the unwieldy federal state called Belgium.

And in the meantime, Antwerp's Jews are having to come to terms with the

reality of importing kosher meat. With a local butcher still closed at 8:30 a.m., small-town style, it was left to a passerby to tell me that kosher meat is not as available as it once was.

"Not all cuts are available – you now need to order," he says.

Belgium's Jews have not turned overnight into herbivores, but the shechitah ban may be here to stay. And if it does, it's another reason to worry about Jewish life across the Western world. As animal rights groups exert ever more control over the public agenda, shechitah will be a flash point issue.

The Fall of King Diamond "A diamond is forever," ran the famous De Beers slogan. That may have been history's most successful advertising campaign, but at least for Antwerp's Jews, it turned out to be wrong. The city's diamond exchange was once dominated by Jews, with "*mazel u'brachah*" famously closing every deal and trading halted on Shabbos. Antwerp is still a hub for the diamond trade, but it's no longer an exclusively Jewish industry. Three-quarters of the trade is now in Indian hands, and Jews have been pushed out.

That may not be obvious in the streets around the exchange. Isaac Diamonds is next to Itai Diamonds, followed by Ilan Diamonds. But around the corner, Jacob Jewelers is succeeded by Nuha Jewelry, with a sign in Hindi.

On the way to Shacharis, I stop a smartly dressed young man with a conventional yeshivish look who turns out to have learned in Philly and the Mir. As I'm having a hard time finding the two shuls that I know exist on the street, he offers to direct me to a minyan. On the way, he gives me a shul-hunting tip: "The way you know there's a shul here is by the security glass and cameras. Otherwise there's no sign from the street."

We enter the Tchorikov *Kloiz*, whose townhouse façade belies an enormous



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interior. The high-ceilinged shul complete with women's gallery has a large beis medrash attached, side rooms, and a big backyard. It must take up half a block, but you'd never know it from the outside.

"This was built with diamond money when times were good," my guide says. "They built everything big back then."

The end of the diamond era is a fact, but when did it happen?

"It depends who you ask," my guide says. "For someone over 65, the good times were 20 years ago. For someone who's been in the business for ten years, even five years ago they say that they were still making money. But it's definitely over."

So what do young Jews do for parnassah in today's post-diamond era? My guide happens to work as an insurance broker. Many of the younger generation work in real estate and connected industries. Further down the street, a Satmar chassid with surprisingly good Ivrit (it emerges that he's from Bnei Brak) tells me that he's a *mefamed* in a cheder.

"Some young people are coming back here," he says "but parnassah is hard."

With lots of Jewish children running in and out of the townhouses, Antwerp clearly has a young future. But King Diamond's fall from power is a reminder that parnassah problems can threaten communities just as much as security problems.

Elan Carr, Rock Star If there's one thing certain about America's liberal Jews, it's that they don't like Trump. But what's equally certain is that a great many religious Jews do. And that explains the celebrity treatment accorded to White House anti-Semitism czar Elan Carr. At a conference where hours of panel discussions were followed by dinners with yet more speeches, Carr's was the one where there was silence. Trump's halo, as well as the fact that European Jews are united by their concern for anti-Semitism, were the reasons that the audience drank in his words and queued for twenty minutes to talk and be



FRENCH CONNECTION Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia says that Jews still have a lot to give to French society

photographed with the man.

In the wake of the second attack on a US synagogue, most recently Chabad of Poway, California, Carr acknowledged that anti-Semitism was a problem on America's far right as well as on the far left, but said that "in American history, never before have we had a president as committed to the fight against anti-Semitism in the world." Alluding to the Belgian situation, Carr said that bans on shechitah amounted to "forced expulsion."

Continuing the conversation afterwards, I asked Carr what he would say to European leaders, including guests from Germany and the EU due to appear next day, whose repeated refrain is "there is no Europe without the Jews," but who in practice allow legislation against shechitah and *milah* to proceed. His answer was that the "prestige of the American administration is a powerful tool in talking to other governments. President Trump has made it clear that this issue concerns him, as has Secretary of State Pompeo."

What Elan Carr didn't touch on was the disaster-in-waiting if Jeremy Corbyn ends up in 10 Downing Street. With the Labour leader still lurking frighteningly near power, and reminding the world of his support for Hamas after the recent Gaza flare-up, Britain's Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis spoke with remarkable frankness about the Jewish community's anxiety at

the prospect of a Corbyn premiership. With relations between Corbyn and President Trump already at a low, it's unclear if all the goodwill in the world from the White House will help if an anti-Semitic Corbyn government takes power.

France: No Bed of Roses Antwerp may be the capital of Flemish-speaking Flanders, but occasional bursts of French are a reminder that for much of Belgium, the lingua franca is French. Just down the road in Brussels is NATO headquarters, whose French acronym is reverse-spelled OTAN. The same is true for the European Union: With Brexit taking British diplomats out, the EU's institutions are about to become even more Gallic than they already are.

The CER is no different. Founded in 1956 by the UK's Chief Rabbi Sir Israel Brodie, the CER has long had heavy French rabbinic input. Until 2011, it was led by France's legendary Chief Rabbi Joseph Sitruk. At one conference dinner, a prominent French rabbi went off-script and departed from the CER's official language of Ivrit — intended to allow participation from rabbis from across Europe — and delivered a speech entirely in French, much to the bemusement of the assembled guests.

With Islamic terror seemingly under control in France at the moment, life there





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is nevertheless no bed of roses for the country's Jews. Two issues stood out in conversations with Jewish leaders, again on the interface between secular society and a Jewish minority community.

France's *Gilets Jaunes* ("Yellow Jacket") protests were on the mind of Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia. Beginning as a protest against perception of elite insensitivity to ordinary French people's struggles, the weekly protests quickly developed anti-Semitic overtones at the margins. Despite this, Rabbi Korsia thinks that Jews have to be a part of the national conversation regarding the real issues that the protesters have raised.

"We have our own faith, but we have to think about society as well. The *Gilets Jaunes* have a real point about social mobility. *Pirkei Avot* talks about 'ein adam she'ein lo sha'ah' — every person has his unique contribution to society. But the protesters feel invisible, which is why they wear the yellow vest."

Down to earth and a man of the world, Rabbi Korsia clearly views outreach to wider society as an integral part of his role. "I have known President Macron for a few years, and I told him recently that Moshe said to Pharaoh, 'with our *ne'arim* and *zekeinim* we will go.' We can't forget the weaker parts of society. Macron told me that he agreed."

But while Rabbi Korsia thinks that Jews still have a lot to give to French society, the open question is whether French society is willing to listen. An ongoing scandal

involving French *kevarim* is another pointer to the growing tension between Jewish life and secular societies across Europe.

France's version of the separation of church and state — known as *laïcité* — is overtly secular, unlike in the United States. Thus, Jewish communities can't buy new cemeteries that are officially Jewish, and have to bury in parts of general cemeteries as well as historically Jewish ones. What has emerged, according to a senior French rabbi who spoke off the record, is that Paris's cemetery, with 200,000 places, has had over 700,000 burials there. What French authorities do to free up space is exhume the bodies of those who no longer pay a "burial fee," and store the remains in caskets.

According to Deputy Chief Rabbi Moche Lewin, that has led to unsavory practices, as places in the packed cemetery have been sold — with the inevitable displacement of a previous *meis*. The number of such cases is at least a few hundred, and the issue has come into international focus in recent weeks. Under pressure, Paris's mayor promised that those buried pre-Holocaust won't be moved, and that authorities will only exhume new cases after notifying the community to allow remains to be buried elsewhere.

While only the scandal, and not the policy, is new, the difficulty in fighting entrenched secularism is part of a bigger picture. Napoleon, who created Rabbi Korsia's position of chief rabbi, famously

said that "we must refuse everything to the Jews as nation and accord everything to the Jew as an individual." That policy remains unchanged: Jews may be able to contribute to French society, but tension with secular society is inevitable — and isn't going away.

Antwerp as Europe Sometime during my visit to the shtetl called Antwerp, I was reminded of an encounter I had with a young Antwerp native a few years ago. Alex walked into a Shabbos dinner that we were leading for young professionals in Tel Aviv. His shaven head and clothing told me he wasn't religious, and his introduction — "I'm from Antwerp, and I'm an atheist" — confirmed it. Yet later in the meal, when a neighbor wanted to clink glasses over a *l'chayim*, Alex held up his hand in warning: "No," he said. "It's *chukas hagoy!*"

That, perhaps, is all that needs to be said about Antwerp's uniqueness: a place where good economic times and seclusion preserved an old-world *heimishkeit* across the Jewish spectrum.

That comfortable status quo is under threat like never before. And like the Antwerp Jewish community, Europe's Jews are battenning down the hatches, retreating behind the equivalent of bulletproof glass, and getting on with their lives. But the combination of a stridently secular society, terror, and economic threat is a graver storm than Europe's Jews have faced for a long time. ●

