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AIME PALLIERE, THE PARADOX OF A CHRISTIAN PRESIDENT OF THE UNION UNIVERSELLE DE LA JEUNESSE JUIVE [UNIVERSAL UNION OF JEWISH YOUTH]

"It was in 1926, at the Congress of Paris, that the Universal Union of Jewish Youth (U.U.J.J.) made Aimé Pallière its president. He remained its head until the end, in other words, until 1935, when the U.U.J.J. chanted its final swan song in a grotesque crow. When I think back on that whole futile period of our adolescence, I cannot help having feelings of guilt. All of our activities were based on bluff, ballyhoo and third-rate orchestras. Charles Nehama, our charming secretary general, who disarmed all the critics with his feverish activity, pinned tiny flags on the map of the world that hung in his office. Then he dragged Pallière from town to town, to multiple conference tours or various international conventions which were held successively in Paris, Strasbourg, Geneva, Antwerp, to exhibit the five-legged calf to flattered and delirious crowds, – the Christian who had 'converted' to Judaism[1]."

In these brief bitter words, Rabi, who from 1930 to 1934 was the editor of *Chalom*, the U.U.J.J magazine, summarizes the situation in its entirety: a Jewish youth movement, with international objectives, an enormous amount of activity directed towards Zionism and a final fiasco, while Pallière expended all his strength on this disorganized youth. Trips all over the world, exhausting and endless, taken on by a man who had given himself to the Jewish people or rather as he liked to repeat "God himself gave me to the Jewish people." Pallière, and this is crucial, believed in a God master of history who guides the steps of each individual. He was convinced of his mission as a Christian in the service of Israel.

Aimé Pallière before the UUJJ: Christian, Noachist, Zionist

At the outset he was a liberal Christian, involved in the Dreyfus Affair in the fight against anti-Semitism, and wrote for the short-lived paper

[1] Wladimir Rabinovitch, alias Rabi, his pen name, a judge in Briançon and the author of numerous articles in the Jewish press, is known for his "Anatomie du judaïsme français", Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1962. In a special issue devoted to Pallière (1875-1949), he recalls his memories as a member of the UUJJ: Rabi "Aimé Pallière et notre futile jeunesse" in *Revue de la Pensée juive*, n. 8, Juillet, 1951, p. 28.

Demain (October 27, 1905 to July 26, 1907) with enlightened Catholics who were called the School of Lyon. Paillère however was not a Dreyfusard like the others. He had discovered the Jewish religion when the affair had hardly begun, in October 1894, one Yom Kippur night, during Neilah, when "by accident" he entered a synagogue in Lyon on the Tilsitt Quai. From that moment on, this 19 year old seminarist, destined for the priesthood discovered Hebrew, the customs, Jewish prayers and took sides in writing for the Jewish people. In 1902, at the beginnings of the crisis of modernism, he published an article in *Univers israélite* under the pen name of Loetmol entitled "Elie Benamozegh and the Solution to the Christian crisis."[2] Note that Loisy's book "The Gospels and the Church" would be published in November of that year. It was thus a very issue-cognizant Christian who was published in a publication which proclaimed itself to be the "Magazine of the Conservative Principles of Judaism." He argued for a resolutely new idea, that in his view was the sole solution: Noachism.

Pallière had gleaned this concept from his teacher, the Kabbalist Rabbi of Livorno, Elie Benamozegh with whom he maintained a regular correspondence from 1897. In 1901 he also reworked a manuscript by Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, which would not be published until after his death in 1914. The basic idea of the book, to create a universal religion for non-Jews that would reserve the priesthood for Jews, was formulated by Pallière as the sole solution to the Christian crisis. To solve the crisis, however, the Jewish people had to become aware of its mission; hence the need to re-Judaize French Jews who had lost the concept of being Chosen for a specific purpose. Pallière's entire life would be devoted to this idea, by any available means. He enthusiastically welcomed the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, which insured the support of the British government for the creation of a national Jewish homeland in Palestine, as a natural restitution and guarantee that through this return, the Jewish people would recapture its religious destiny. This was Pallière's portal to the Zionist universe, more particularly its religious sector. It was in this spirit that he joined the newly founded French chapter of Keren Kayemeth Leisrael (KKL) in May 1925 and was the vice president of the Central Commission of this organization from June 24, 1926 to 1938. He became the "propagandist" of the KKL and spent his time writing brochures, giving conferences all over the world, placing coin boxes or "trees" in the communities of North Africa, Germany, Italy and the USA where he made an extensive trip during the winter of 1929, the guest of Stephen Wise. What was missing from this activity? Turing Jewish youth into Zionists.

As Rabi states: "What did he see in us? He saw beyond our day-to-day lives. He saw our futures clearly. He was determined to make us aware

[2] U.I. n. 48, August 15, 1902 to n. 50, September 12, 1902.

once again of ourselves and our own truth. He pleaded with us to remain loyal to our mission. He tried to inculcate in us the feeling of our spiritual greatness. He wanted us to be worthy of our very great name. He said we were princes (…)…"[3]

U.U.J.J. An Instrument to re-Judaize Jewish youth?

To convince Jewish youth however, Pallière had to be on the inside, and the UUJJ appeared to provide the opportunity. In 1921, Charles Nehama and Jacques Matalon, two young men from Salonica, had founded *Interjuive,* "an association for exchanges among Jews the world over." In 1923, when both were living in Paris, this association became the UUJJ. "Viewing Judaism as a cultural or ethnic given rather than a religious one, the UUJJists aimed for mutual understanding between Jews and other peoples, an understanding which would lead to the messianic times where peace would be permanent. They had great faith in the League of Nations," states Danielle Delmaire[4]. Nothing was very specific however, and the guidelines were fuzzy. Gerard Cholvy notes a comparable remark by H. van Effenterre on the French Scouts (Eclaireurs Israélites): "it is a youth movement, i.e. something very unstable. In compiling its history, doing surveys initially appears to be a waste of time and effort."[5] This is indeed what emerges from Rabi's recollections: "a futile period of our adolescence (…) All our activities based on bluff, ballyhoo and third-rate orchestras." He adds however: "But Pallière devoted himself entirely (…) he took his role of president very seriously. He attended all the meetings of committees and commissions. He followed the debates conscientiously, only intervening with tact and sureness (…)."

Why? Because Pallière gave himself the mission of re-Judaizing Jewish youth, as is illustrated by a letter dated July 24, 1927, which I found during my examination of the KKL papers in the Central Zionist Archives of Jerusalem. Aimé Pallière was elected President during the first congress of the UUJJ which was held from August 1 to 6, 1926 in Geneva. After one year in office he summarized his activities to the Central Committee of the Jerusalem KKL as follows: "I preferred writing to you personally in my dual capacity as President of the UUJJ and to inform you thus in a

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[3] Rabi, op.cit, p .28.

[4] D. Delmaire, "Les mouvements de jeunesse juifs en France, 1919-1939," p. 318 in Mouvements de jeunesse chrétiens et juifs : sociabilité juvénile dans un cadre européen, 1799-1968, Paris, Cerf, 1985.

[5] G. Cholvy, "Les organisations de jeunesse d'inspiration chrétienne ou juive, XIX-XX siècles, p. 13 in Mouvements de jeunesse chrétiens et juifs : sociabilité juvénile dans un cadre européen, 1799-1968, Paris, Cerf, 1985.

detailed but also confidential manner* (…) When the UUJJ was founded at the Carlsbad Congress in 1923, the secret goal of the organizers was to lead the Jewish youth movement – which had been on the outside – to Zionism. Its stated neutrality as regards Zionism can thus be seen as a tactic. However the statutes which were drawn up were clearly not specific enough and this is why the work of the 1926 Congress, which brought together sixty delegates from twelve different countries was to orient the associations towards more effective collaboration in the work of the renaissance of Palestine"[6]. Pro-Palestinism was thus more easily accepted by the vast majority of French Jews (concrete or moral assistance to the Jewish population in Palestine) whereas most Jewish organizations had opted for neutral stances as regards Zionism and its political dimension.

For almost ten years, Pallière attempted to achieve this goal by providing some backbone to the UUJJ. This was done primarily through his magazine *Chalom* – he became the editor in chief as of 1927. An analysis of this periodical shows that his method was similar to forms of Christian patronage created at the end of the nineteenth century. Bi-weekly meetings, conferences at the Comoedia, informal lectures, screenings of films (in most cases a Zionist film lent by the Jewish National Fund: *Modern Judea* in 1928, *Spring in Palestine* in 1929, three films on the Balfour Declaration in 1930), dance matinees in the ballrooms of large Parisian hotels. A library at the headquarters of the UUJJ, 11bis rue Faraday in Paris was inaugurated in May 1926, the head office was located as of January 1927 on rue Poissonnière. Issue 15 of *Chalom* in March 1926 announced that to achieve the goal of "occupying Jewish youth and preventing youth from spending time in ill-reputed areas", two tennis courts would be reserved for members of the UUJJ at the Porte des Lilas every Saturday afternoon.

Paillière, now President since August 1926 wished to go further. He was there to sermonize and politicize Jewish youth. Through several articles published in *Chalom* starting in June 1927, he presented a "general education program" which consisted of learning Hebrew (which he himself spoke and wrote perfectly, both ancient and modern), the study of Jewish history, religion and the duties of Israel. He also added ethics, an introduction to Jewish literature, the Jewish holidays, adherence to Zionism, sports and outings and a division into age groups of older and younger students in order to develop mutual teaching, and lastly encounters: "Jewish youth weeks." *Chalom* in July 1927 (# 50) tells us that this program, presented by Pallière, was received with applause. On page 22 of the same issue, Rabi approves the program but tones it down

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* Underlined by the author.

[6] CZA, KKL 5/474, from Aimé Pallière to the KKL Jerusalem, July 24, 1927.

somewhat, rejecting the word "doctrine" used by Pallière. The letter found in the Central Zionist Archives of Jerusalem, dated July 24, 1927, (the same month) suggests that Pallière was not duped by this juvenile enthusiasm for his program: "All my personal efforts over the past year have been oriented towards giving UUJJ a doctrine, an activity program leading I would say not only towards a Zionization of our Union but also a return to Judaism which naturally covers Zionism as an integral part and even in my opinion, goes beyond it on certain points (…)"

He then complains about reactions to this program by "French Jewish officialdom". The program was perceived according to Pallière, as "very dangerous (…) more dangerous than Zionism itself, because it places the affirmation of the unity of the Jewish people as the basis of our Union." By integrating non-religious Jews, Pallière in fact disproved the notion that the Union was solely a religious movement. "(…) Our union accepts Jews who are not religious on the same footing as those who are not Zionist. It accepts them as good sons of the Jewish people with the objective of awakening their Jewish awareness and giving them a Jewish education (…). You can thus presume that (…) the program (is) seen as dangerous by assimilated Jewry (…)." He then goes into a description of the general mentality, the hostility of the rabbis, i.e. this time religious Judaism, and is discouraged: " I would not like to hide that the state of the UUJJ in no way corresponds to the breadth of its program. Our section in Paris indeed has 600 members but the vast majority of these young people have no Jewish life and are only scarcely interested in the educational side of the association. We do not have any branches in the provinces and it is very difficult to create them since there we cannot do anything without rabbis and because we can't do anything with them…" He thus pinned his hopes on other countries. The Tunis section sent him a fervent homage as of November 1926 and he made a trip around the Mediterranean to create or inspect the remote sections of the UUJJ.

The fight for peace and against anti-Semitism

It would be erroneous however to minimize Pallière's political activity within the UUJJ. Catherine Nicault rightly points out that the UUJJ "is the ancestor to a certain extent of the International League against Antisemitism (LICA); it regrouped leftist youth nourished by a "pacifist ideal and friendship among peoples. In 1928 this movement was by far the largest with 2627 members in France."[7] Pallière, its President, knew how to mobilize this force by organizing meetings and encounters open to the public (a topic which deserves a whole article in itself). For example in

[7] Catherine Nicault, *La France et le sionisme 1897-1948 : une rencontre manquée* Paris, Calmann-Levy, 1992, p. 150.

March 1926 the magazine *Chalom* reports that the UUJJ is the only international Jewish organization invited by the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation, associated with the League of Nations. In February/March of 1927 the UUJJ campaigns in *Chalom*[8] and on June 3, it organizes a meeting against the *numerus clausus* applied overtly in Hungary and covertly in Poland and Rumania. This meeting was presided over by Victor Basch, with the participation of the League for Human Rights. The same publication reports on pogroms in Rumania at Oradea in its issue of December 1927 and suggests recourse to the League of Nations. In 1929, it reports on the hostilities between Jews and Arabs in Palestine and the Hebron massacre. Emergency funds, meetings, demonstrations took place all over the world and the UUJJ reacts in the form of articles and conferences by witnesses invited to speak by Pallière: Professor Charles Gide in 1929 and Albert London in 1930. In June 1927, the verdict in the Schwarzbard affair is pending: Shalom Schwarzbard shot the nationalistic and anti-Semite Ukranian leader Petlyura in June of 1926 in the Latin Quarter in Paris[9]. *Chalom* suggests a "principle which should be adopted by all Jews: no dealings of any kind with countries that assassinate Jews."

In January 1928 it was the "*Allied Youth for the League of Nations*"[10]: thirty five youth movements from all religious denominations who drew up a charter to the League of nations. UUJJ was a signatory. The objective was to organize peace through young peoples' support of the new organization, the League of Nations. International cooperation was needed, which would not conflict with the French concept of "fatherland" since the two concepts are in no way contradictory. The article ends with an appeal to all peoples, all social classes and all convictions, and in April 1928 Aimé Pallière asks all the sections of the UUJJ to organize a large rally "*Jews for the League of Nations*." He suggests holding a "universal peace festival, which would be submitted by the UUJJ to the League of Nations and all the organizations involved in peace." It was perhaps through this universal approach that Pallière believed he had achieved his goal. This Noachism, this universal religion that he promoted in all his speeches, never losing sight of it for a moment, may have been his variant on a League of Nations peace cult. The idea was in the spirit of his time, and Pallière believed in it.

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[8] *Chalom*, # 25, Juin 1927.
[9] *Chalom*, # 29, Juin 1927.
[10] *Chalom*, # 35, Janvier 1928, p. 18.

An encounter between Jews and Christians?

The ultimate contribution of the Christian president was making the UUJJ convivial. He introduced the Catholic religion to young Jews, convinced that if they were familiar with it they would no longer believe it was superior to Judaism. He hosted figures favorable to the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine such as Father Dieux, an orator friend or Abbey Violet, a well known Dreyfusard. When his autobiography appeared in 1926, *The Unknown Sanctuary: My Conversion to Judaism*" he invited representatives of all the Christian denominations to debate, as well as rabbis. Rabi recalls "these two public meetings of 1927: his ascetic face only expressed fraternal attention even towards those who criticized him violently. Then he got up and said "Mr. Rabbi, you have not understood anything." He meant that you cannot judge a religious experience of this type with a narrow minded attitude." Narrow minded, Rabi was indeed. Overly Zionist, overly moralizing, overly religious, inspecting every Jew with the eyes of Chimera, Pallière was suffocating this youth. "It was in 1934, we all had clenched teeth," says Rabi. " The shadow of our destiny crept slowly forward. I rebelled against Pallière.(…) I have not said it to him but I let it be clearly understood that Pallière was a stranger among us… I vilified him. I spat in his face. I humiliated him. He never bore a grudge against me, in any case he never showed the slightest resentment. With his finger on his lips he commanded silence. He thought that God would redeem my soul in another way."

Rabi's last comments ring very true. For Pallière the fate of the Jews was in the hands of God and he was in His service. The failure of the UUJJ has been rationalized: hostility of rabbis, competition from the French Eclaireurs Israelites (scouts), misunderstanding of the problems of youth by its leaders. However, the message had made its impact, the seeds had been sown, more perhaps on the other side of the Mediterranean. Young Tunisian Jews, turned Zionists by the UUJJ, and activists as of 1924 in Tunisia, emigrated during the Aliyah of 1931 to found the future Israel. "As God willed," Pallière would have said, a finger on his lips…

Catherine Poujol