Napoleon and Macron

I have always been fascinated by Napoleon Bonaparte (in French it is Napoléon). As a schoolboy, I read the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl's "Napoleon For and Against" and realized that there were so many different ways of understanding him. History was not clear cut or one-sided. Was he good or bad? A great mind, a brilliant general, a visionary, or was he an arrogant egomaniac? He came to power at a crucial moment in French history. The glorious revolution of 1789 had descended into chaos. He saved it and restored order and French pride.

At this moment France is at a crossroads again. The de-capitation of schoolteacher Samuel Paty by Muslim extremists is the continuation of an existential struggle for France's character and future. Every country has the right to decide its character. If France wishes to remain an open and free society for all its citizens, it must fight for it. This is Macron's Napoleon moment.

The French Revolution, abolished, in principle, the different treatment of people according to religion or origin that had existed under the monarchy. Roman Catholicism had been the established state religion which disadvantaged all other denominations and religions. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man guaranteed freedom and free exercise of worship, provided that it did not contradict public order. Yet anti-Semitism remained endemic in French society, even amongst supposed enlightened figures such as Voltaire.

Napoleon had shown sympathy for Jewish aspirations at the siege of Acre in 1799 when he published a proclamation in which he invited all the Jews of Asia and Africa to gather under his flag in order to re-establish the ancient Kingdom of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, Napoleon's forces lost to Britain and he could not carry out his plan.

He was determined to spread the egalitarian, humanitarian ideals of the enlightenment throughout Europe. He was the first European ruler to grant equality of citizens and the rule of law to everyone including the Jews. Wherever he went he gave Jews equal rights despite opposition from almost every religious and civil leader in Continental Europe. Of course, he was primarily concerned with France and believed that France would benefit culturally and economically from liberating Jews. He is supposed to have said, "To the Jew as person everything, but as a nation, nothing."

Napoleon told the Sanhedrin of Jewish notables he convened in 1806, that France would do everything to defend and protect the Jews individually on the understanding that they accepted the civil laws and secular culture of France. He submitted twelve questions to them to see if the Jewish community was willing to integrate into French society. And satisfied with the replies he undid a thousand years of French anti-Jewish legislation. To encourage Jews to participate in French society he removed all the old laws restricting Jews from most occupations, forcing them to reside in ghettos, pay special penalties and he lifted laws that limited Jews' rights to property, worship,

and freedom of movement. In 1807, he designated Judaism as one of the official religions of France, along with Protestant denominations who had also been persecuted by Catholic monarchs.

The Jews of Central Europe regarded Napoleon as the major forerunner of Jewish emancipation. In Austria, Chancellor Metternich said, "I fear that the Jews will believe (Napoleon) to be their promised Messiah." All the states that came under French authority applied Napoleon's reforms. In Italy, the Netherlands, and the German states, the Jews were emancipated and able to act as free men for the first time in those nations. After Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, The Council of Vienna reimposed all previous restrictions on Jews outside France and the restoration of discriminatory measures. And post-Napoleon France's anti-Semitism was so endemic that it led to the Dreyfus Affair, Marshall Petain, and continues to this day in certain circles.

Napoleon was probably the greatest European military genius. His armies swept across the Continent winning battle after battle. Singly no European army could stand up to him. But his success had the effect of forcing them to unite to destroy him. Even after defeat and Exile to Elba, he was able to come back and try again with the support of his faithful armies. Finally, at Waterloo in 1815 against the whole of the rest of Europe, he was brought down. The English General Wellington said the battle was "a damn close-run thing." Napoleon was exiled to St Helena (where the petty British humiliated him) and thus ended his magnificent but short rule.

He was not just a great general, but a brilliant, dynamic, man of ideas and administration. Amongst Napoleon's most impressive and lasting contribution was the reform of the French legal system known as the Napoleonic Civil Code which became law in 1804. Not just because it brought the myriad different regional legal systems together into one coherent code, but because it enshrined human rights in law in a way that the American Constitution had failed to, particularly on race. On the other hand, and relevant to our times, he was not as enlightened in his attitude towards women and reinforced patriarchal values. But he did little for women. He thought that women were only machines for making babies and did not need an academic education. He would be no hero in the world of metoo#. And he is still reviled by some for selling huge swathes of North America, the Louisiana Purchase, to the USA in 1804. At the same time, France became the least racist of all Colonial Powers

He set up the first national system of education with secondary schools that offered scholarships for good students. His code reinforced a patriarchal society. A father's permission was required for the marriage of sons up to 25 and daughters up to 21. Fathers had the right to imprison their children for disobedience. Divorce for adultery was allowed only if the husband had introduced a permanent mistress into the family household or was convicted of a serious crime. A wife could be imprisoned for two years for adultery while a man could only be fined. A husband could not be prosecuted if he murdered his wife caught in flagrante delicto. Married and single men did not need to support illegitimate children. Women could not make legal contracts, take part in lawsuits, serve as witnesses in court or to births deaths, or marriages. They could not sell products in the markets without their husband's consent. Frankly, those who accuse Biblical Judaism of being

restrictive and petty should take a good look at Napoleon's code written three thousand years later.

When I joined the Persian community in New York I discovered that Napoleon was a hero in Iranian society. A very popular book *My Uncle Napoleon by* Iraj Pezeshkzad in 1973, was turned into a successful TV series. It makes fun of the widespread Iranian belief that the British and Americans were responsible for anything that went wrong in Iran; such events as the Anglo-Russian invasion in 1941 and the 1953 CIA Coup d'état against Mosaddegh. One man's saint is another's sinner! And the French still love to debate whether Napoleon was good or bad for France. I am on his side.

Much has changed since Napoleon's day. Yet most significant nowadays is that Napoleon enshrined the concept of laicity, secularism, in France. A secular society that, while it respected religions, did not allow them to dictate to the nation. This vision is now being challenged and faces enormous pressure from a growing threat of Islamism in France which has also led to the resurgence of Fascism. Up to now, Europe has treated the threat half-heartedly. After the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan massacres they promised to deal with fanaticism but have failed miserably. President Macron is talking the talk but I doubt that he will do anything. Which should be a warning to what might happen to any country that cannot decide what its values are and fails to fight to preserve them. Political expediency seems to override principle everywhere. Napoleon must be turning over in his grave.