

JEWISH LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In Jewish terms, two different Europes existed from the 8th to the 13 centuries. One was Moslem Spain, and the other was Christian Europe. This led to the rise of two distinct ethnic and cultural groupings - Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry.

Sephardim

As for Moslem Spain, Islam was much more tolerant of Jews and Judaism in those days than was medieval Christian Europe. The Jews might have been disparaged for rejecting Mohammed's teachings, but they were never accused of killing him. As long as the Jews were willing to play a low-key role in the assertion of their religion, they enjoyed a great deal of personal and religious freedom. They were never forced to publicly debate the truths of Judaism with Moslem clerics or Jewish apostates, nor were their books and manuscripts ever confiscated and destroyed by public governmental actions. Even though forced conversions, destruction of Jewish property, and banishment were not unknown to the Jews of Moslem Spain, such acts were seen as aberrations caused by the occasional eruption of Moslem fundamentalism and political revolution. Jewish genocide was never part of any public policy backed by the majority of Spain's Arabs. Moslem society was freer, more open, and more cosmopolitan than that of the Christian world.

Other factors contributed to the form of Jewish life in Moslem Spain. The climate was sunny and warm; Spain experienced no harsh or dark winters. In addition the country's vegetation and produce was rich and varied, with the generous availability of citrus fruits and numerous vegetables. Moslem control of trade with the East guaranteed the availability of spices and other condiments that in Christian Europe were rare and exotic. The rate of literacy among the general populace was also far higher than in the

Christian world. Moslem Spain had professional scholars, learning centers, and large libraries, and it encouraged the study of philosophy and the general sciences. Poetry, literature, song, and architectural innovation were highly treasured arts, and its practitioners were held in high esteem. It is also presumed that life expectancy was greater in Moslem Spain than in Christian France or Germany (where the life expectancy was only 35 years old). Certainly the knowledge of medicine, anatomy, and pharmacology was much more advanced among the Arabs, where even dentistry was understood and practiced.

In the Arab domains of Spain, Jews were an integral part of the economy, unlike in Christian Europe where they were only peripheral to it. Spanish Jews were landowners, even of large estates, as well as merchants, importers, bankers, and farmers. They were also doctors, professors, poets, administrators and public officials. Though subservient to the Arab rulers of the country, they were not treated as the chattel of those rulers, and a great deal of social and economic opportunity was open to them. Only in northern Spain, where the Christian Reconquista had already begun in the 11th century, did the position of Spanish Jewry resemble that of France and Germany.

Ashkenazim

In contradistinction, Ashkenazic Jewry lived in a dark, repressive, violent, superstitious, and fanatic society. Jews were literally owned by the lords of the manors and were legally chattels, much as were the animals and the serfs. Their economic role was initially severely limited, and they engaged chiefly in agriculture, handicraft, and small shopkeeping. In France they were engaged in the wine industry, and in Germany they were prominent in the raising and dealing of cattle. The Church and the nobility also used the Jews as their middlemen in money lending activities, and thus were portrayed by the Church in a most negative light. General society tended to be ignorant, illiterate, and governed by rumors and superstitions.

In this world of the fantastic, demons, fairies, witches and devils all really seemed to exist. With no understanding of sanitation, diet, or anatomy, medieval Christian medicine often times was more deadly than the diseases it allegedly combated. There was also no accurate measure of time - no clocks, no widespread use of calendars, no written records. Even though the paths were always clogged with travelers - wandering was common during the Middle Ages - there were no maps and few roads. Travel was extremely dangerous. Journeys consisted of brief periods of security in the communities along the route, interspersed with hours and days of fear and danger in the forests. The majority of travelers had only the haziest notion of where their destination lay. The only way to travel was in groups. Jews were at particular risk when forced to travel. Yet they did - to visit scholars, to attend yeshivos, to engage in commerce, to search for a better quality of life, or to satisfy their innate curiosity about G-d's world. The term "wandering Jew" carried a great deal of truth, for Jews were much more mobile than the general society in which they lived.

Feudal Society

The majority of Europe's population was impoverished and enslaved by the manorial or feudal system of life that governed the Middle Ages. Only the knight, who was dedicated to war, or the clergyman, who was subject to the Church and canon law, had options for escaping the usually rapacious conduct of the lord of the manor to whom he owed allegiance. As for the serf, he was bound to the land of the lord by legal, economic, and social chains. He could not leave the manor estate and was treated as chattel, a near slave. Only with the emergence first of the medieval village, and later of the town, did the serfs slowly begin to escape these bonds. Still it would be centuries before the despotic system of the manor finally collapsed.

The Jews belonged nowhere in this rigid class system, being at the same time a complete social outcast, as well as a vital economic tool. Thus the treatment of the Jews was spotty, inconsistent, erratic, and subject to

violent swings of extremism. Because of this uncertain existence, Jews could not make long-range plans or commitments, were extremely mobile, and attempted to maintain as low a public profile as possible. Even the few Jewish rich were cautious in displaying their wealth, and they were most conservative in their behavior. Still the Jews remained the convenient scapegoat for the lord of the manor, the violent knight, the clergy, and even the lowly serfs. Any disaster, miscalculation, or economic and social calamity could be blamed on the Jews. Jews had no standing in society, no legal protection or rights, and no desire to actively participate in European Christian society. Jews tended to live together in the towns, with the infrastructures of synagogue, mikveh, and schools close at hand. Thus even before the implementation of the government policy of enforced ghettos, Jews chose to live in close proximity to one another.

Fun and Childhood

The Middle Ages was certainly not a fun time. The entertainment of the time was limited mostly to traveling troubadours or storytellers, and primitive play-acting. The knights engaged in jousting. Jews restricted these types of entertainment to Purim, weddings, and other religious festive occasions.

Childhood ended early, many times in death, and by the age of ten almost all medieval children were part of the labor force. Though Jewish children received an education until the age of ten or twelve (girls were taught home-making skills at home) - all children were engaged at an early age in the daily struggle for a livelihood. Boys who showed promise in their studies continued in the study of the Talmud. To further their education they would travel to far-away scholars and yeshivos to later become the rabbinic scholars of the next generation. The majority of Jewish boys, though, became workers, artisans, farmers, porters, and apprentice shop-keepers, most before mid-adolescence. Since life was short, marriages were arranged early, and childbirth began at a young age.

Unfortunately since mortality was a common occurrence, there were usually many orphans in Jewish society. Poverty, disease, and random violence threatened everyone. As a result, the Jewish community undertook many social and familial responsibilities which continued to a feeling of unity among all its members. The Jews in medieval Christian Europe took care of their own and survived as best they could.

The Growth of Towns

The eventual establishment of towns had a singular and positive effect on the Jewish population. It was the merchants who made the towns. They bought the privilege of self-government, substituting a money economy for one based on land. Gradually a middle class arose, rich and energetic and contemptuous of the feudal world that surrounded them. Gradually Jews, too, flocked to the towns to live where there existed a modicum of freedom and a place deemed safer than the countryside.

Towns provided the environment that allowed Jewish life and scholarship to grow and develop. But towns often had strong physical and spiritual drawbacks. The stench of refuse, dung, sewage, animals, and sweaty human bodies packed together gave rise to a miasma of stench in medieval cities. The smells of towns could be detected from miles away. All garbage and waste matter was thrown into an open sewer that ran down the middle of the street, and animals roamed the streets at will. This led to the spread of disease and infection, and death at an early age. Jewish streets were somewhat cleaner and tidier than the rest of the city, but sickness took its toll everywhere.

Homes in the Middle Ages were mainly one-room structures. The virtue of privacy was virtually unknown. In Jewish homes the latrine was usually in a separate area, but it was not until the age of the Renaissance that the ideas of personal space and greater cleanliness became more widespread.

The Jews were on the cutting edge of fomenting such progressive virtues throughout the later medieval era.

At the same time that towns were the catalyst for change and progress, the Jews within the towns were frequently at the forefront for the expansion and growth of these towns. The towns also fostered the ancient ideas of fairs, usually held in the fall and late spring, which encouraged trade merchants to congregate and deal. These fairs were the beginnings of a monetary economy which replaced a barter one. They also helped expand the spread of knowledge and skills across artificial, political borders. The town fairs helped break the hold of the lords on their vassals, undermining the manorial, self-contained and self-sufficient feudal society. New ideas began to take hold, such as the interdependent system of international trade, monetary payment, credit, and mercantilism. The early Middle Ages had suffered from a chronic lack of coinage in circulation, inhibiting trade and commerce. Jews were prominent in developing the economic vehicles of credit and other forms of payments, all necessary for modern, mercantile trade. Jews were also prominent in the field of money-lending and introduced the idea of interest payment to facilitate the growth of trade. Because of their international connections with Jewish merchants in other parts of the world, the Jews were in the forefront of helping to expand international trade. Jews were soon referred to as “money people”, or “sharp dealers”, and eventually the word “jew” became associated with ruthless and even questionable business dealings. This soon gave rise to the growth and spread of anti-Semitism throughout the medieval world.