

THE BLACK DEATH

The Black Death, or the Bubonic Plague, arrived in Europe in late 1347. The plague most likely began in Genoa and then spread throughout Europe. It came encased in fleas that infested rats on board ships from the East. These ships had docked at the ports of Europe. Originally the bacteria spread through bites from the infected fleas, but eventually it infected the air itself. Thus one could literally breathe one's self to death. Terrible public sanitary conditions, a dense population in cities and towns, and a complete ignorance of the existence of infectious diseases and of how to prevent them, caused the rapid spread of the plague.

Christian Europe believed in superstitions, magic, devils, witches, conspiracies, poisoned wells and waters, and vindictive violence. The Church portrayed these demons in pictorial forms, and many times the forms resembled the Jewish population in their midst. By the middle of the century, Europe was becoming a vast graveyard. Millions died painfully, suddenly, and helplessly. Unburied remains brought typhus and other diseases, so that death reigned everywhere. The population of entire cities disappeared overnight. Vast tracts of agricultural and cultivated land were abandoned, and the forests and desolation reclaimed the progress of past centuries. It is estimated that between one-third and one-half of the population of Europe died during the 14th century. The plague reached every country in western and central Europe, and from Spain to Scandinavia it raged unabated. The psychological trauma that engulfed Europe as a result of this inexplicable disaster gave rise to all sorts of bizarre and often violent behavior. All of this would spell tragedy for the Ashkenazic Jewish communities of Europe.

The Jews also suffered from the plague. However, the perception of the non-Jewish world was that the Jews suffered less than their Christian neighbors did. In part, this was true due to the much more sanitary and hygienic conditions of life which halacha and traditional Jewish life imposed on the Jews. Halachically regimented hand washing, care of the sick, and

the immediate burial of the dead, were religious requirements in Jewish society which served to help in controlling the plague. Nevertheless, it is estimated that close to twenty percent of the Jewish population died as a result of the Black Death.

Worse than the plague itself was the reaction of the Christian world to the Jews in their midst. The Jews were accused of poisoning the wells, thereby causing the mass deaths. The fact that the Jews drank from these same wells and managed to survive, was explained away by the belief that the Jews were allied with the Devil. It was the Devil himself who provided the Jews with secret incantations by which to render themselves immune to the poison. Jews were also accused of invoking wrathful spirits on the general populace during their prayer services. As a result, constantly recurring blood libel accusations reared their ugly head. The Jews became the perfect scapegoat of the victims of the Black Death, and the plague was viewed as a Jewish conspiracy against Christian Europe. The climate was such that any accusation against the Jews, no matter how absurd, was given credence, and the aroused mob pillaged, robbed, murdered, and massacred to no end. Waves of pogroms swept Germany, Austria, and Bohemia from 1348 to 1351, and tens of thousands of Jews perished. In addition, hundreds of Jewish communities were erased from the European map. Bavaria and the Rhine valley were left without Jews for almost half a century. If they were not massacred en masse, in many cases they were expelled from their towns. The only step taken by the emperor was to fine the inhabitants of some towns for the loss of revenue caused him by the murder of the Jews. Indeed, Jewish life and scholarship came to a halt in Germany, and not until the 15th century would it begin to revive.

Before the pogroms that accompanied the Black Death destroyed much of Ashkenazic Jewry, it had been a vital and intense community of Torah scholarship. By the beginning of the 13th century, the main work of the Tosafists was completed, even though the editing of other variations of Tosafos would continue for many decades. R. Yitzchak of Vienna incorporated much of the halachic thrust and flavor of Tosafos in his famous work Ohr Zarua. This halachic guide, arranged according to the

Talmudic tractates, included many responsa from R. Yitzchak's predecessors and contemporaries. His son, R. Chaim, expanded on this work and eventually published an abridged version for the masses.

The most influential rabbi of this time period was Rabbi Meir HaLevi, the rabbi of Vienna from 1360-1390. Aware of the ravages that the times of the Bubonic Plague had wrought upon the caliber of scholarship and leadership within Ashkenazic Jewry, he instituted the requirement that all those wishing to serve as rabbis must first be granted a heter hora'ah by a recognized rabbinic authority. This requirement, though at first controversial and opposed by many, eventually took hold and remains the norm even today. It was enacted in recognition of the reality of the time. With the decimation of the traditional infrastructure of Ashkenazic Jewry at this time, it had become far easier for charlatans and ignoramuses to achieve positions of leadership in Jewish society. R. Meir HaLevi's decree did much to ward off this threat. Semichas Moreinu was instituted to ensure that accredited rabbanim were indeed qualified to rule on questions of halacha.

Another basic change took place in Ashkenazic rabbinic life in the wake of the disasters of the 14th century. From the time of the beginnings of Ashkenazic Jewry, and even dating back to Talmudic and Geonic times, rabbis served as spiritual leaders of their communities without remuneration. This helped to preserve the independence and integrity of the rabbi and greatly enhanced his power and influence. Rambam and others were adamant in insisting that rabbis take no money from the public for their services. As a result many rabbis also worked as doctors, artisans, vintners, merchants, and sometimes even as laborers. But that system could no longer survive under the dire conditions of the latter medieval period. The economic times were so difficult and the number of potential rabbis so few, that the communities undertook the support of their rabbi as part of the communal budget. This arrangement, begun in Austria towards the end of the 14th century, became accepted practice throughout the Ashkenazic world within a century.

Toward the end of the 14th century, Jewish life in Germany and Austria began to revive. Here and there individual towns admitted Jews and promised them protection. However, Ashkenazic Jewry was only a shadow of its former greatness and influence. Too many Jews had died, and too many communities had been ravaged for any easy restoration of normative Jewish life to occur. Because of the disintegration of the German empire and the absence of a central authority, Jews survived at the whim of the individual rulers of each locality. Expulsions from place to place occurred with increasing regularity. The only positive from this upheaval in their lives was that Jews were always able to move to a neighboring town, till things simmered down in their original dwelling places.