

THE CRUSADES

1st -3rd, 1096-1189

The Jewish world was irrevocably altered by the Crusades, and ultimately came to be seen by world-wide Jewry as a tragic watershed in the history of their exile. The Crusades were born of a complex mix of theology, politics, diplomacy, and greed. Eventually the crusading momentum took on a life of its own, and for many centuries it helped to destabilize Europe and the Mediterranean basin.

The belief in a just war and violent punishment of heretics and sinners was a basic tenet of the medieval Christian world. In addition, the idea of a universal Christian kingdom governing all the world and its inhabitants was part of earliest Christian thought. Thirdly, there was fierce competition between the popes of Rome and the kings of Europe for political dominance of the continent, a competition that often took the form of open war. Each side believed itself religiously justified in its position, and popular opinion held that these papal wars were not only permissible but even sanctified. Fourthly, the feudal class system defined the position of a knight as that of a permanent warrior. Thousands of knights wandered Europe constantly looking for battle, since fighting was their only skill. They would often pillage, rob, and rape indiscriminately, causing a major problem for both the Church and the ruling government. The masses believed it was the task of the Church and the government to have the knights duly occupied in some just war, preferably one far away from their homes and villages.

Toward the end of the 11th century, Pope Urban II undertook an international policy for the Church and called for a Crusade. Its goal was an attempt by the Christians of the West to take Palestine away from the Moslems and to make it a province of the Roman Catholic Church. He offered to absolve the sins of anyone becoming a soldier of the Cross (the

granting of indulgences) and to guarantee admission into Paradise to anyone who fell in battle fighting for Christianity. [Indulgences were the good deeds of saints and martyrs of the Church, no longer living, which were over and above the amount needed by those individuals to enter Heaven. Those extra good deeds then became the property of the Church, and she could dispose of them as she saw fit, granting them to those whom she deemed fit to receive them. These indulgences were then sold or granted by the Church as a reward or inducement for behavior which the Church deemed worthy. The Church could thus offer indulgences to anyone willing to take part in the “holy” Crusades.] The response was remarkable. Every parish church became a recruiting station, and every monk with the ability to stir the emotions of the populace urged his men to abandon their more earthly occupations and join the army of the Lord.

Thus started a tremendous emotional movement. Even children enrolled and set out on the perilous journey, certain that G-d would guide them on the road. The people were horrified that the sepulcher of Jesus should be in the hands of unbelieving Moslems, and they were willing to sacrifice themselves for its redemption. But there were many others who had divergent motives for joining the Crusades. Some of the nobility who joined up were nothing more than fortune hunters, looking for new lands to rule over. As for the serfs, they participated in the hope of going on a vast adventure, for freedom from a dull and servile life.

The First Crusade began in 1096 and soon spread to France, Germany, and Italy. Over 100,000 men responded to the call, but this vast assembly was unfortunately very poorly organized. The peasants marched off without proper leadership and without adequate provisions. Unrestrained, they brought havoc to all the towns and countryside they passed through, and before long they descended into frenzied mobs and began to attack the local Jews. Since many Jews had wealth, and had long refused to convert to Christianity, the taking of their property as booty served as a constant temptation. Why should they go forth to kill G-d’s enemies in a distant land

while the Jews who were close at hand, and were equally opposed to Christianity, were left behind unharmed. Soon the cry was heard "Kill a Jew, and save your soul!" This emotion of hate that had been kept alive by generation after generation of clergymen preaching narrow religious zeal now erupted into a murderous frenzy.

Secure in the favor of the princes of the land, and on excellent terms with their Christian neighbors in the cities, the Jews of the German states which lay close to the river Rhine refused to believe the warnings sent by the Jews of France that danger threatened. However, as disquieting rumors of unruly crusaders on the march continued to reach them, they asked the local nobility, the bishops, and their fellow townsmen whether they could count on their help. This was freely promised. The Jews also decreed a fast day to invoke the aid of G-d. Towards the beginning of May, at the time when the Jews were preparing to celebrate Shavuot, the Crusader hordes approached the Rhine on their eastward march. The Jews of Speyer, Worms, Mainz, Cologne and other neighboring towns sent their property for safekeeping to the homes of friendly Christian burghers. Some went into hiding in Christian homes, others hid in the palaces of the bishops, while still others, depending on their neighbors' promises of protection, remained in their homes. In the end, it was all the same. When the crusading bands arrived in any town, they were welcomed by the local mobs who then gleefully joined them. The local burghers who though sincerely sorry to see their fellow Jewish citizens suffer, nevertheless refused to risk their own lives in defending them. The resident bishops and nobles could also not withstand the onslaught, and many of them even sympathized with the attackers. The Jews defended themselves and sometimes temporarily beat back the attacks, but theirs was a hopeless struggle against the vastly superior attacking forces. The Jews could have saved themselves by agreeing to be baptized, but the vast majority preferred to die with the cry of Shema Yisroel on their lips. Altogether some 10,000 Jews lost their lives in Europe during that month of May. As for the Jews of Central Europe, Peter the Hermit led a mob that attempted to forcibly convert the Jews of

Regensburg and killed all those who resisted. The Jews of Bohemia were similarly massacred. And when the crusading army captured the city of Jerusalem in 1099, they drove the Jews who lived there into the synagogue and then set fire to the building.

The terrible loss of life and property resulted in a permanent change in the position of the Jews. At the beginning everyone tried to restore the situation to normal. The Jews were urged to return to their homes, and the emperor permitted the return to Judaism of those who had been baptized by force. But the chief obstacle in the way of returning to their former conditions was the fact that the mind of the common people had been so poisoned as to believe that it was pleasing to G-d to kill a Jew.

In 1144 a Second Crusade was preached. The Jews then found a defender in the most unexpected place. Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux was the most respected churchman of his day. He came forward with a denunciation of those monks and priests who were urging the murder of the Jews. He did this because of a deeper understanding of Christianity. There were still many attacks upon Jews, both on individuals and on communities. But due to St. Bernard's intervention and the better organization of the crusading forces, these attacks were comparatively mild.

In 1189 still another crusade was preached. This was the Third Crusade. By this time attacks upon the Jews in France and Germany no longer required the frenzied emotions of a crusade to start them. They had become a frequent occurrence, requiring a slight pretext. More directly connected with this crusade was the misfortune which overtook the Jews in York, England. Jews had come to settle in England about the time of William the Conqueror, and for a century they had lived there in peace. The trouble started on the day of the coronation of Richard the Lionhearted. London was full of men who had vowed to join the new king on the crusade which he had promised to lead right after his coronation. The rumor spread

suddenly that the new king had ordered an attack on the Jews. Here was one order which the rabble quickly obeyed, and royal officers were hard put to stop the outrages. Richard had three of the ringleaders put to death and issued a proclamation forbidding anyone to molest the Jews.

A few days after Richard's departure from the country, riots broke out afresh. This time the crusaders in the smaller towns were the instigators. Soon the entire population, including the wealthier citizens and the clergy, joined them. Most serious was the riot at York. Sensing trouble, about 500 Jews took refuge in the royal castle, called Clifford's Tower. First their homes were pillaged, then they were personally besieged. For several days they fought back bitterly from the castle walls. But with no food and few weapons, they could not hold out for long. They decided instead on suicide, and when the enemy finally broke in, they found the castle a silent tomb. This time even the call to conversion had been a lie. Those few, who trusting the invitation to be baptized and who had not submitted to self-slaughter, were also killed by the mob. The ringleader of the attack and a number of his followers owed money to some of the Jews. They wanted no heirs or witnesses to survive; and when all the Jews were dead, many of the attackers lost no time in going to the cathedral and burning all the records of their debts which had been in the church for safekeeping.

The 12th century of the three great crusades thus witnessed the gradual transformation of the Jews of Christian Europe. They went from a peaceful and quite prosperous group of people to one holding on to but a bare semblance of comfort. They never knew what tragedy the next day might bring along. A number of factors were involved in this change, all combining against their peace and their life.

By the time of the Crusades most of Western and Central Europe, except for Spain and a part of Italy, had become united under the Christian religion. The Jews remained the only ones who still continued to deny the claims of Christianity. As long as the churchmen were not quite sure of their

real strength, they had been willing to argue with the Jews and had tried to convince them to convert. It soon became evident that this was hopeless; the Jews insisted upon remaining as Jews. The Churchmen of that day then felt that to permit the Jews to continue in their favorable position would be to encourage doubt about fundamental Christian teachings. It followed that if the Jews refused to admit the Christian argument, it was necessary to prove therefore that a Jew could not possibly be a good human being, and that G-d did not care for him. Many of the clergy and the monks of that period were also convinced that the Jews were in league with the Devil and were deliberately trying to corrupt innocent Christians. Others believed that the Jews were merely being stubborn, stiff-necked, or at the least afflicted with a blindness of the spirit which kept them from seeing the truth of Christianity. The practical recommendations of the clergy varied in accordance with their attitudes. Some advocated preaching to the Jews, others urged political and economic pressure, and others wanted to expel them completely from Christian society. Before long these anti-Jewish feelings led to overt anti-Semitic attacks against all of Europe's Jews, and no Jew was entirely safe or secure wherever he might live.