

LIVING TOGETHER

LIVING APART



RETHINKING JEWISH-CHRISTIAN
RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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INTRODUCTION

AFTER TEACHING a course on relations between Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages for several years, I noticed a recurring query posed by many students. How did Jewish communities continue to survive in Europe despite facing what seemed to be endless persecution, violence, and expulsion? A fundamental question to be sure, but one to which I did not have a ready answer. My own work on the conversion of Jews to Christianity grew out of the sense that relations between Christians and Jews were driven largely by Christian antagonism to Jews.¹ In trying to resolve the paradox of persecution and survival with my students, I felt I was missing the real significance of Jewish-Christian relations. I began to think of ways to respond to this larger issue of the long-term resilience of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Europe. The result is this book, really an extended essay, which tries to reorient our understanding of the meaning of the history of Jews in medieval Europe.

For too long scholars have tried to find that meaning in the nature of Jewish suffering in the Middle Ages. Their conclusions reflect the rhetoric of dispersion and suffering embedded in classical Jewish and Christian thought. Jews themselves drew on the biblical tradition of exile to understand their condition under Christian rule. Even before Christianity's advent as the official religion of the Roman world in the fourth century, Jews were used to the idea of living in a diaspora. Whether Jews experienced life outside the Land of Israel exclusively as suffering and trial has recently been challenged.² Whatever the truth of the long-term experience, the *idea* of suffering in the dias-

pora quickly became embedded in liturgical and other forms of Jewish religious culture after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

Yosef Yerushalmi has analyzed how early rabbinic tradition and later medieval Jewish authors of prayers and chronicles created a kind of endless loop of Jewish suffering. They associated contemporary persecutions with traditional dates of traumatic destruction such as the fall of the Temple. In this foreshortened and essentially ahistorical sense of the Jewish past, all episodes of suffering and persecution were essentially the same; they all derived from God's testing and chastisement of the Jews.³

Even after the Enlightenment and the growing acceptance of Jews into European society, these liturgical memories of persecution and suffering provided the mental parameters of Jewish historiography of the nineteenth century. Jewish scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement—following in the footsteps of earlier eighteenth-century enlightened scholars (*maskilim*)—heroically tried to assert the value and vitality of the Jewish past using the tools of modern historical research. However, they could not (or did not wish to) escape fully from the narrative of persecution and suffering.⁴ The suffering of the Jews—or perhaps the survival of the Jews despite great suffering—was a way for nineteenth-century historians such as Heinrich Graetz to strengthen a sense of Jewish community as well as signal a break with the past. History could show that the emancipation of the Jews in modern Europe, albeit imperfect, offered an escape from the persecution and obscurantism of the past. At the same time, it was thought the Jews played a crucial role as messengers of ethical monotheism and were full participants in the history of Europe. Ultimately, Zionist historians disdained much of the Jewish past as a history of persecu-

tions and diaspora, or recast it in more palatable terms emphasizing the survival of the Jewish nation.

The dispersion and suffering of the Jews made perfect sense to Christians. The Church Fathers saw the dispersion of Jews as justified punishment for the Jewish rejection of Jesus. Moreover, the denigration of Jews was cited by generations of Christian polemicists as proof of God's rejection of Israel. The Augustinian model of toleration of the Jews, which would prove so important to Jewish-Christian relations, was still based on the divinely ordained subservience of Jews to Christians.

Protestant historians who studied the Middle Ages, building on humanist prejudices of the Renaissance, saw medieval Catholic Europe in general as a superstitious and violent deformation of true Christianity. The medieval treatment of Jews fit what they thought was a cruel and corrupt church. Once Protestants moved beyond Lutheran anger at the Jews for not converting, eighteenth-century scholars such as Jacques Basnage articulated a more sympathetic view of Jewish history.⁵ The Catholic historical tradition answered the Protestant challenge with its own romanticized vision of a hierarchical and natural medieval world. In this vision, Jews were pushed to the margins and fixed in historical sensibility as usurers who provoked what violence was visited on them. This was in many ways an echo of the original Christian sense that Jewish history as a coherent, meaningful narrative ended after the incarnation.⁶

As the professional academic study of the Middle Ages evolved in the still Christian universities of Europe and America, the experience of Jews faded as a central concern of academic scholarship. Without theology driving interest in Jews, historians of the Middle Ages seemed largely indifferent to the history of Jews in medieval Europe. The work of Jewish historians was largely ignored. When Jews were mentioned,

what mattered was their persecution or their recurring historical role as moneylenders.⁷

More recently, the fate of Jews, as well as that of other minorities in the Middle Ages, has become a central concern of the historical discipline. The Holocaust, of course, challenged scholars to look for what went so tragically wrong in Christian attitudes toward Jews. The rise of ethnic history in general has encouraged a flowering of scholarship on the Jewish past and accorded it a new standing in the academy. The new attention to minorities in medieval society may be due as well to the influence of multiculturalism and postmodernity's interest in the bizarre and marginal.⁸ Whatever the motivation behind this postwar scholarship, the larger narrative structure, emphasizing fundamental and constant persecution, echoes earlier approaches to Jewish history.

The historiographical fulcrum for much of the recent work on the treatment of Jews is the claim that twelfth-century Europe became a "persecuting society."⁹ The treatment of Jews in the medieval past thus ominously signals the fundamentally intolerant character of European states and Christian culture. Although a suggestive characterization, this interpretation reads back into medieval history the anachronistic power and efficacy of the twentieth-century totalitarian state.¹⁰

Seeing medieval Europe as a persecuting society obscures the complexities of the Middle Ages and reduces the Jewish experience to a one-dimensional narrative of victimization. Making Jews the "Other" of medieval Europe, a group singled out for marginalization and persecution, creates arbitrary categories that do not reflect medieval realities. Indeed, does this increasingly popular term actually help us to understand the dynamic between groups in medieval Europe? What does such a label mean in the complicated world of the Middle Ages? As Paul Freedman has recently observed: "The Middle Ages

certainly created a panoply of mistrusted and persecuted enemies—Saracens, Jews, lepers, heretics, apocalyptic peoples. But the very heterogeneity and proliferation of such despised peoples calls into question how ‘the Other’ is to be used as a theorizing tool.”¹¹ Even if such distinctions shaped thinking about nonnormative groups, the very idea of an “Other,” as Freedman notes, suggests that “elite society is presented as unanimously and unquestioningly determined to push a variety of feared or despised peoples to the margins of the human.”¹² This Manichean vision of medieval Europe ignores the complexities, paradoxes, and tensions within elite society. Moreover, it encourages a scholarly emphasis only on the persecution of Jews.

This one-dimensional interest in Jewish suffering has not gone unchallenged. Salo Baron famously called in the first half of the twentieth century for scholars to move beyond seeing Jewish history as only the story of persecution. However, his challenge was not really taken up by scholars in any systematic fashion.¹³ Recently, John Hood’s book on Aquinas, Ivan Marcus’s treatment of education and cultural assimilation, Robert Lerner’s study of positive apocalyptic attitudes toward the Jews, and Johannes Heil’s rereading of 1096 all suggest that persecution is not the entire story of Jewish history in the Middle Ages.¹⁴ Violence against Jews, as we have been reminded, was contingent on local conditions and not the result of unchanging hatred or an irrational structure of medieval society.¹⁵

I think that it is time for an attempt to rethink Jewish history of the medieval and early modern period along these new lines. Indeed, as I argue below, the older histories have inadvertently distorted or at least obscured our ability to see a fuller range of Jewish experiences in the Middle Ages. Michael André Bernstein has recently cautioned against the practice of writing history with the end in sight.¹⁶ As a result, we have lost sight of what is most important about the Jewish past in medieval

Europe. Instead of persecution and suffering, it is more important to understand how and why Jews survived in societies whose dominant theology increasingly cast them in the role of deicides.¹⁷

The categories of persecution and tolerance focus our attention on only one aspect of relations between Christians and Jews. We should look to see how Jews and Christians of medieval Europe engaged each other across a larger spectrum of relationships and experiences. How did Jews *live* in medieval European society as it evolved? It is this task that the first two chapters of the book take up. I believe that we will find that Jews of the Early and High Middle Ages were deeply integrated into the rhythms of their local worlds. Moreover, they faced many of the same challenges as their Christian neighbors. The variety and dynamism of medieval Christianity created a society in which the Jews were not alien interlopers facing a uniformly antagonistic Christian world. In chapters 3 and 4 I will discuss how that rootedness was expressed in cultural and social integration into Christian Europe.

The integration of Jews into medieval society and culture makes it easier to understand how Jews could analyze, contextualize, and hope to manage the violence that did erupt. Their rootedness in local societies and their familiarity with local patterns gave them skills that would help them survive or at least to take actions that they thought would protect them. As I will argue in chapter 5, the nature of medieval violence itself affected how Jews perceived the violence directed against them. Jews were used to seeing aggression against them in the larger context of medieval social conflict that drew in many other groups. Jews were aware of the high levels of physical and rhetorical violence displayed against many groups and individuals in European societies. Jews were not singled out in medieval societies as the preferred target of violence. Moreover, the level

of violence against Jews—either oppressive laws, outright attacks, paranoid accusations, or expulsions—were essentially transitory and contingent events that did not fundamentally destroy the *modus vivendi* between most Christians and Jews of the time. The transient nature of the violence gave Jews a sense of fundamental stability and security. This discussion should help us rethink our reliance on the idea of the Middle Ages as a “persecuting society” in which continuous repression of Jews was a fundamental part of medieval culture.

From 1290 onward, expulsion was the primary form of aggressive governmental action taken against Jews of medieval Europe. Jews were pushed out of most Western European countries (with the exception of Italy and parts of Germany) by the second half of the sixteenth century. They found refuge in Ottoman Turkey but mostly in Christian Poland and Lithuania. Such a widespread movement against Jewish communities, combined with perceptions of the Middle Ages as a crucible of persecution, makes it easy to see how the expulsions have been cast as the inevitable culmination of anti-Jewish feeling. In chapter 6, I hope to challenge this underlying sensibility and emphasize that the actions and policies that led to final expulsions from England, France, and Spain—or temporary expulsions in Italy and Germany—should not be considered inevitable. Such an argument is not naïve. The expulsions happened. Christians planned and executed them, and many Jews suffered from the dislocation and the associated violence. But we are used to seeing them as completed actions, linked together by a common culture of anti-Jewish sentiment, not the unfolding of uncertain, contingent, and separate events that did not necessarily reflect the sentiment of most Christians.

Indeed, the “end” of the Middle Ages, or rather the perceived division between the Middle Ages and the Reformation/Renaissance that historians have constructed, has played a large role

in shaping our understanding of Jewish-Christian relations. In chapter 6 I will also argue that the traditional conception of the Renaissance and Reformation has distracted us from the fundamental continuities in relations between Christians and Jews into the sixteenth century. The second half of the sixteenth century saw the end of the expulsions and the beginning of the readmission of Jews to many of the localities from which they had been expelled. The experience of Jews in Italy and Germany at this time suggests many continuities with medieval conditions. It may get us closer to the lived experience of Jews during that time to see the expulsions not as the conclusion of the medieval phase of Jewish-Christian relations but rather as periodic breaks in a larger trajectory of generally stable Jewish-Christian relations that survived into the early modern period.

Ultimately, this book is an attempt to read medieval Jewish history against the grain. The narrative of Jewish history in the Middle Ages, whether consciously constructed or not, has been one of rising persecution that ends in expulsion. This is my hope: “The historian restores history to the complex situation which prevailed when it was still in the course of being decided. He makes it into the present once more, reviving its acute alternatives. In the true sense of the word, he makes it happen again, that is, he has it decided again. He dissolves the content, the product, the form of the completed work or the done deed, at the same time appealing to the will, to the living power of decision, out of which these works and deeds grow.”¹⁸

I am acutely aware that I am dependent on the work of others for many aspects of this book, particularly the later surveys of Italy, Spain, Germany, and France. The interior culture of the Jews is also neglected in this book. (The growing literature on various aspects of medieval Jewish culture would, of course, help make the case that Jews found Europe to be more or less congenial since a flourishing Jewish civilization arose even

under the relative constraints of Christian Europe.) In order to construct a comprehensive argument about the nature of Jewish-Christian relations in the medieval and early modern west, I have strayed far from my own limited areas of expertise. Even where I disagree with the interpretations of others, it is their focused scholarly efforts that make a work of synthesis possible.

Others will likely disagree, but the fundamental truth or meaning of Jewish history in the Middle Ages—if we are right to apply such a term as meaning—is the continuity of relatively stable relations between Jews and Christians. Readers will notice quickly, and many will no doubt criticize, my inattention to the cultural expressions of medieval anti-Judaism. It is clear that during the twelfth and thirteenth century and continuing into the later Middle Ages, images and language about Jews was increasingly aggressive and derogatory. (At points the cultural pressures could be translated into policy—particularly the actions of pious kings under the influence of mendicant anti-Judaism). However, documenting this hatred still leaves the question of how Jewish communities survived in such a cultural atmosphere. How do we account for the relatively limited violence given the viciousness of the images? The cultural expressions of anti-Judaism may thus be giving us a distorted vision of the total experience of medieval Jews.

The objection might be raised as well that examples of good relations between Jews and Christians should not outweigh the general anti-Judaism of the culture in a general assessment of the medieval Jewish experience. I see the problem, or the potential solution, differently. It is difficult to imagine that relatively open relations between Jews and Christians could have formed unless social norms allowed room for such contacts. If mutual antipathy was truly and constantly dominant, how could such relations have evolved? Peaceful relations between Jews and Christians did not mean that antagonism did not

exist, but that animus was not a constant feature of social relations—or at least that hatred and suspicion was controlled. In this sense, “normal” interactions between Jews and Christians may not be exceptions but indications of much greater fluidity in medieval Christian mentalities about Jews as well as Jewish reactions to Christians.

By the sixteenth century, attempts to short-circuit relations between Christians and Jews had apparently succeeded. But with the decision to readmit or to stop expelling the Jews, European authorities allowed a return to a pattern of relations established in the Middle Ages. What requires recognition and explanation is not the actions of medieval governments or violent groups of Christians, which can often be explained in terms of situational policies and pressures, but the resilience of the *modus vivendi* forged in the Middle Ages between European Jews and Christians. We need to understand how Jews and Christians lived together while still living apart.