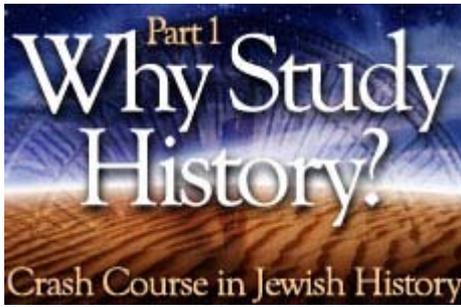




# **Crash Course in Jewish History**

Rabbin Ken Spiro



**We learn Jewish history not only to avoid the mistakes of the past, but to understand where our destiny is taking us.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

This series is designed as a basic overview of all the Jewish history -- all 4,000 years of it.

Usually when one mentions the word "history" most people break out in a cold sweat. They remember back to high school and they associate history with the memorization of names, dates, places and events necessary only for exams and then promptly forgotten afterwards. This is probably why Mark Twain said, "I never let my schooling interfere with my education."

So before we actually begin talking about Jewish history, let's talk a little bit about why we need to learn history in the first place. What is history? What benefit does learning history serve?

History is, first of all, the testing ground of ideas. We can talk in theory about ideas, but the passage of time clearly shows us which ideas are right or wrong -- what works and what doesn't. So, for instance, a hundred years ago a Communist and a Capitalist could debate which system would dominate the world, but recent history has shown us that Communism has failed and Capitalism is sailing along.

There's a tremendous amount of lessons that can be learned from history. As the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are destined to repeat it."

So the basic reason to learn history, in general, is that people, more or less, are the same. Technology might change, the geopolitical realities of the world might change, but people tend to do the same stupid things over and over again. And unless we learn from the past and remember it, and apply those lessons for the future, we're destined to get stuck in the same rut and repeat the same mistakes over and over.

## **SPECIAL THEME**

This theme applies to Jewish history as well. The Torah teaches:

*Remember the days of old; understand the years of generation after generation. Ask your father and he will relate to you, your elders and they will tell you (Deut. 32:7).*

But Judaism also introduced a concept into human history that is revolutionary in all aspects, particularly in the aspect of morality and the notion of history in general -- the idea of an infinite God who acts in history.

The Jewish conception of God is that of Creator, Sustainer and Supervisor, which means not a God who created the world and then went on vacation to Miami, but an infinite Being who is actively involved in creation. To put it more philosophically: The entire physical world is a creation of God's consciousness. The universe has no independent existence outside of God willing it to exist.

Everything in the universe is under God's control -- from the quantum to the cosmic. This has monumental implications for the events that take place on the tiny speck in the universe that we call Earth. If God knows and controls everything, then history is a controlled process leading to a destination.

Since God is the cosmic scriptwriter, director and producer, the events of human history are not random. This is a story with a plot -- a goal. This means we're headed for a specific destination; there is a finish line.

This is another reason not to repeat the same mistakes -- we want to get to that destination as quickly and as painlessly as possible. History is the map to get us there. Therefore the theme of this Jewish history series is Jewish destiny -- our past is our future.

God continually puts the Jewish people and all humanity through similar challenges over and over again. Only when we get it right do we move forward. Within the study of history lies the key to breaking out of this cycle, moving forward towards our ultimate destination

Therefore in this series, we are not going to focus so much on the names, dates, places -- although it's very important to know those details -- but on the patterns of human history and the lessons that we all need to learn from the past.

The history we have learned in school is the history of power -- the big battles, the big empires. The bottom line is that the people who make the noise get the attention. But Jewish history doesn't focus on power or empires. It is a history of something far more profound yet much more subtle; embedded behind events is an unfolding drama of a destiny being fulfilled. This is the real drama of human destiny.

When we look at the history through the lens of Judaism, we see things in a totally different way. It doesn't change the events; it only changes how we understand the events. It's important to keep in mind throughout this series that what we're talking about is the ultimate cause and effect scenario that is directing history

## **JEWISH TIME**

Jewish time begins with the creation of Adam who is seen as the physical and spiritual pinnacle in terms of the creation of the world.

As the Book of Genesis relates it, Adam was created on the sixth day in the process of creation, more than 5760 years ago. (The year 2000 in the Gregorian calendar, which begins count from the time of Jesus, is 5760 in the Hebrew calendar, which begins counting from the time of Adam)

Adam is unique among the other creatures, inhabiting the earth not just because he gives rise to such an amazingly innovative group of descendants, but because Adam is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, "in the image of God." This means he has a soul -- a *neshama* -- a higher, spiritual, intellectual essence. This Divine spark is the Godlike essence we human beings all have.

Once Adam is completed, God then, so to speak, takes off his cosmic watch, hands it to Adam and says, "Now we switch to earth time." A day becomes a revolution of the earth on its axis, a year is the earth going round the sun once, etc. According to Jewish chronology, God took off his watch more than 5760 years ago.

There is a profound lesson rooted in the idea of starting the Jewish calendar from the completion of Adam. Just as the movie director starts the cameras rolling when the big actors show up on the set (even though

years of preparation may have gone into the project before the actual filming starts), so too does God start His Earth clock when Adam appears on the planet. The obvious lesson to be learned from this is that the focus of creation is man. God creates an entire universe for human beings. The ultimate question is then, why are we here?

If God is infinite, then he has no needs or wants. He lacks nothing and there is absolutely nothing we can do for Him. So why were we created?

One of the most fundamental ideas in Judaism is that God created us give us the ultimate gift: a relationship with Himself; transcendence, which is *dvekus* in Hebrew. Connecting to God is the ultimate form of relationship and that which our soul ultimately yearns for. Every pleasure we experience and every meaningful relationship we make in this world is just a small taste of the ultimate relationship of our soul with our creator.

That is what the Garden of Eden is all about. It is not, as it is so often portrayed in art, some kind of tropical Club Med. Rather it is the ideal physical-spiritual reality where human beings are freed from all the things that distract them: bills, shopping, carpools etc and are totally focused on achieving the purpose of creation: elevating ourselves and the world around us to the highest possible relationship with God.

The plot line of human history should have been very straightforward: God places us in a perfect environment where are free to do that which we were created for. We spend the rest of history hanging out in the Garden, perfecting creation and building relationship with God.

Unfortunately something went badly wrong. Beginning with Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge, the relationship began to fall apart. Humanity found it too difficult to maintain a relationship with an invisible God. People felt that showing respect to the various visible forces of nature, created by God, would be the way to indirectly show respect to God Himself. What happened however was that within a few generations worship of God was replaced by worship of nature: the sun, the moon the trees... God was forgotten and idol worship was practiced by all. The whole purpose of creation was lost.

If the purpose of creation is relationship with God and that relationship was destroyed early on in our story, then the only possible plot for the rest of the history has to be humanity returns to God. We'll continue with that story when we speak more about Abraham in Part 4.

The appearance of Adam corresponds more or less to the beginning of civilization. Historians and anthropologists basically say that civilization (earliest cities and primitive writing) begins about 5,500 years ago, which is about when Judaism says Adam was created.

What we know about Adam and his immediate descendants -- the most important one of whom is Abraham, the first Jew -- we learn from the Bible. But how trustworthy is the Bible as a history book? We shall take up that subject in the next installment.



by [Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**An enormous amount of information in the Bible has been borne out by archeology. There is not much direct evidence, but there is a *huge* amount of indirect or circumstantial evidence.**

We assume that people throughout human history always studied history, but that's not true. As a matter of fact, if you go back more than a couple of thousand years you'll find people had no interest in history. The first historian in the West is Herodotus, a Greek who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. And he's given the title: Father of History.

Columbia University historian, Joseph Yerushalmi, who wrote an excellent, highly-praised book called *Zahor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, says that "If Herodotus was the father of history, the father of meaning in history was the Jews."

This is a profound idea.

**"If Herodotus was the father of history, the father of meaning in history was the Jews."**

First, not only were Jews recording history well before Herodotus, but while Herodotus might record the events, the Jews were looking at the deeper meaning, and that deeper meaning can be found most importantly and most significantly within the Bible itself.

The first of these stories that we will examine in the future installments of this series pre-dates Herodotus by about 1,300 years. It is the story of Abraham and it takes place around the 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE, or 3,700 years ago.

Now don't make the mistake of thinking the Bible is a history book. For example, Abraham, when he appears in the Book of Genesis is already 75 years old. He's one of the most significant figures in Jewish history and the Torah doesn't tell us about him as a child or as a young adult -- we pick up his story when he is an old man already.

The Bible is not concerned with giving us all the details of Abraham's life. It is interested only in history as a means of teaching us the important lessons of life -- it's a book of theology in Jewish worldview first and foremost. Therefore, it focuses on the basic information that we need to know.

## **HOW ACCURATE IS THE BIBLE?**

An article was published recently in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'Aretz*, smashing the Bible, and in the same week, an article was published in *US News and World Report* -- a cover story, no less -- supporting the accuracy of the Bible vis-a-vis archeology.

Why such diametrically opposed views? Because archeology is a very complicated field. So a few words of caution are in order.

The definition of archeology is "the discovery and interpretation of the physical remains of previous civilizations and peoples." Note that within the definition of archeology is the word "interpretation". How one archeologist interprets the meaning of a particular find can be very different from how another archeologist interprets the meaning of the same find.

**The bias of the archeologist is going to affect how he interprets the information.**

Archeology is not a hard science. When an archeologist finds a piece of rock, a vessel, or a piece of a building, he tries to decide what it means. The find has no label on it, unless it's a written document, and even written documents are open to interpretation.

So when people make definitive statements about what archeology does or doesn't say, you have to be very careful, because the bias of the archeologist affects how he interprets the information.

As the early books of the Bible are concerned, there is little *direct* evidence for the characters in the Bible. There is, however, a huge amount of *indirect* or *circumstantial* evidence -- names, places, business contracts, marriage contracts, migratory patterns. An enormous amount of information in the Bible has been borne out by archeology.

That is as far as the early books of the Bible are concerned, but once we get to later books, like the Book of Kings, for example, there is excellent direct evidence, written records of other emperors, etc. But the early events exist more or less in a historical vacuum and, unfortunately also in an archeological vacuum.

Keep in mind that the same thing that applies in a court of law applies to archeology: *Lack of evidence is no evidence of lack*. The fact that I haven't found Abraham's camel saddle doesn't mean Abraham didn't have a camel or a saddle. And, indeed, there is a huge amount of circumstantial evidence supporting the basic historicity of the Bible.

Archeology doesn't definitively prove the Bible, and it certainly doesn't discredit it. In fact the more we find, the more we see that there's a tremendous amount of historicity in the text.

In summary, the Bible is not a book of history, yet it contains history and culture, which is more or less borne out by archeology. It's a book of teachings, and it's the ideal way to learn the patterns of history. And if we understand that the reason why we're learning history is to learn lessons, then we have to pay extra special attention to what is going on in the Bible.

## **PATTERNS IN JEWISH HISTORY**

*The actions of the fathers are assigned to the children.* (Nachmanides)

This is a very famous Jewish saying and Nachmanides was not the only one to say it. What does it mean?

On the microcosmic level, within the stories of Genesis in the Bible, we're going to see that what happens to the ancients will be repeated by their children.

On a macrocosmic level, the personalities and interactions of the early forefathers -- the patriarchs and matriarchs -- are going to be a model for all of Jewish history, and all of human history. This is why we have

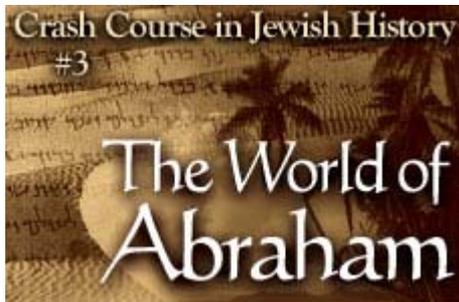
to pay extra special attention to what's going on at this early phase of the Bible, because here is where the patterns are set.

**The Jewish people are arguably the oldest surviving people on the Planet Earth.**

Additionally, we must remember that the Jewish people are arguably the oldest surviving people on the Planet Earth, and because they have been spread out throughout the world, when we learn Jewish history we have to pay attention to all of human history. It's a great framework. To understand Jewish history means to build a great deal of general knowledge of the history of the world at large.

We can't appreciate Jewish history (or the history of any people for that matter) without understanding the larger context in which it takes place.

In the next installment we are going to zoom out and take a macro look at the world into which the first Jew, Abraham, was born.



**By understanding the character of Abraham, the "proto-Jew", one can understand what Jews are all about.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

Jewish history doesn't happen in a vacuum. No people's history happens in a vacuum. So first we have to zoom out and get a little understanding of where Abraham fits in the world of his time.

Abraham appears at a period of time called the Middle Bronze period, around the 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE. (Early civilization is characterized by the metals they predominantly used and the Middle Bronze period includes the period of time from 2200 BCE until 1550 BCE.)

Whereas most anthropologists believe that hominids, forerunners of human beings physically, originated in Africa, human *civilization* begins in the Middle East in the Fertile Crescent, which is where Abraham was born.

**Human civilization begins in the Middle East in the Fertile Crescent, which is where Abraham was born.**

When we say civilization, we are talking about sophisticated arrangements of people living together, not just simple agrarian settlements, not just a few people living in a few huts. About 5,500 years ago in the Middle East, there occurred an evolution of humanity from hunter/gatherers -- people who spend their whole day looking for food -- to people who were able to domesticate livestock. This meant they could raise animals to eat them or to use them for their milk and their hides, and to plow the land to grow crops.

Once this occurred, there was a surplus of food, which led to population growth and people started specializing in types of labor -- you had craftsmen, scholars, priests and warriors. That, in turn, led to the growth of cities.

The earliest civilizations in the world, according to most opinions, began in the area called the Fertile Crescent.

## THE FERTILE CRESCENT

The Fertile Crescent encompasses the area flowed by the Nile in Egypt, the Levant (the middle section where Israel is located), and the area flowed by the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers.

The three great rivers contribute mightily to the fertility, and consequent desirability, of this area. The Nile is an incredible river, the largest river in the world. Without the Nile, Egypt would be a desert. In ancient times, 3% of Egypt was arable land, 97% was desert. Also the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers are two tremendous rivers; they run through what is today basically Iraq and into Turkey, but what historians have dubbed Mesopotamia, which is Greek for "in the middle of two rivers."

There is some debate whether the first civilization sprang up in Egypt or in Mesopotamia (specifically in the section of Mesopotamia called Sumer) but we can be fairly sure that the first hallmark of civilization -- writing -- originated in the Fertile Crescent.

**The first hallmark of civilization -- writing -- originated in the Fertile Crescent.** Writing was a tremendous invention though we take it for granted today. It began with pictographs. You drew a stick figure and that stood for "man." Later those pictures evolved into more abstract symbols which stood for phonetic sounds, until eventually there came about a system of three "letters," each representing a sound and combining together to make a word that conveyed an idea. (To this day, Hebrew is based on a three-consonant root system.)

Writing was the single greatest human invention. All the technology of today depends on the collective accumulation of accurately transmitted information, which now comes so fast we can't keep up with it.

## "A SPEAKING SOUL"

From the Jewish perspective the ability to express oneself -- whether through writing or speech -- personifies what human beings are all about. We learn that when God created the first human being -- Adam -- He "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7) The Hebrew phrase *l'nefesh chayah*, "living soul," can also be translated as "a speaking soul." (Targum Onkelos)

Of the two earliest civilizations that developed, Egypt is unusual because it's surrounded by desert and so it is virtually unapproachable. Egypt as a civilization survived for close to 3,000 years. This is an incredibly long period of time for civilization to survive. Why did Egypt survive for so long? Because no-one could invade it. It took the Greeks -- specifically Alexander, the Great -- to finish Egypt off, and then it becomes a Greek colony.

Mesopotamia had no such natural defenses. It was a giant flood plain sitting in the middle of the great migration pattern of all ancient peoples. Whatever conqueror came out of Asia or out of Europe set foot here. It had no natural defenses -- no mountains, no deserts -- and it was a very desirable fertile land.

We see the land changing hands many times and a huge number of civilizations in this part of the world -- Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans and then, of course, the Islamic invaders.

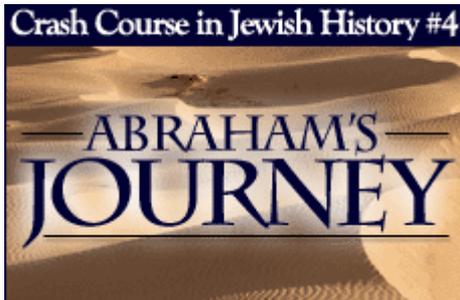
## AT THE CROSSROADS

In this tumultuous place is where Jewish history begins -- at the bottom of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, in the cradle of civilization. This was the logical place for civilization to begin in terms of the development of agriculture and culture. And it's also a logical place for Abraham to appear, because if Abraham is going to affect the world, he has to be at the crossroads of the ancient migration pathways. If he were born an Eskimo or an American Indian, all of human history would have been different.

**Abraham was born in Mesopotamia, in a bustling place called Ur Kasdim, located in today's Iraq.**

But Abraham was born in Mesopotamia, in particular in a bustling place called Ur Kasdim, or Ur of the Chaldees, which has been excavated by archeologists in today's Iraq.

This was then the center of earliest human civilization, a cosmopolitan center. And it is from here that Abraham's journey begins



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**Abraham gave rise to a nation of Hebrews -- people who live "on the other side."**

History is a guidebook for the future. The early lessons of Jewish history reveal a pattern, so we have to pay extra special attention to anything that happens at this period of time.

When we meet Abraham in the Bible in the Book of Genesis, he is already 75 years old, which is interesting because we'd love to know what Abraham did as a little kid and what sports he played, etc. But God doesn't want to fill our brains with extraneous information. He only wants to give us the messages we need to learn, because He's trying to teach us and guide us.

**The story of Abraham begins when God first speaks to him at age 75.**

The story of Abraham begins when God first speaks to him. This means that Abraham lived his whole life without prophecy, without any kind of outside confirmation that his ideology of monotheism is correct, and this says a lot about Abraham's dedication to truth.

In an entirely polytheistic world, Abraham chose to see the reality of one God and to dedicate himself to a mission -- if necessary, at the cost of his own life -- of bringing that reality to human consciousness. He did so not because God needs people to die

for Him, but because that's reality.

It's one thing if God is regularly speaking to you, you'll take any pain to live in that reality, but to just go on the basis of your own conviction takes some doing. And this gives us a little indication of what a great human being Abraham was and what a tremendous idealist he was. He did not mind standing "on the other side" -- and that is the meaning of the word *Ivri*, "Hebrew."

And this is why I call Abraham "the proto-Jew." From Abraham onward, we see this idealism -- an uncompromising drive to "change the world" -- in the Jewish personality.

Abraham passed on this drive to his descendants, who have been at the forefront of virtually every major advance, cause, or social movement in world history. (Jews have not only been awarded a disproportionate number of Nobel prizes for their intellectual contributions, but have led movements such as communism, socialism, feminism, civil rights, labor unions, etc.) Notes non-Jewish historian Ernest Van den Haag:

Asked to make a list of the men who have most dominated the thinking of the modern world, many educated people would name Freud, Einstein, Marx and Darwin. Of these four, only Darwin was not Jewish. In a world where Jews are only a tiny percentage of the population, what is the secret of the disproportionate importance the Jews have had in the history of Western culture? (Ernest Van den Haag, Ernest, *The Jewish Mystique*.)

The answer to Van den Haag's question is understanding the personality of Abraham.

### **THREE PATTERNS**

So now let's take a look at how Abraham is introduced in the Bible -- not for purposes of Bible study but to identify the sweeping patterns we encounter here, of which we can identify three.

Number one:

*God said to Abram, "Go from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1)*

We see here that God is not like Charles Dickens. Dickens got paid by the word, and he would be as verbose as possible. God is the exact opposite. So the question we have to ask is: Why does God, who uses words so sparingly throughout the whole Bible, repeat this command so emphatically? "Separate yourself completely, not just from your land, but from your birthplace, from your father's house."

If you grew up in a specific house for a specific period of time, that will always be home for you. When you think of home, no matter where you've lived after that and how comfortable you've been, you'll always think about it as home. There's a very deep connection. So God is saying to Abraham: "Separate yourself on the most basic emotional level."

**God tells  
Abraham and the  
Jewish people:**

**Separate yourself completely and go in a different direction.** More importantly, from the macrocosmic, historical perspective, God is saying to Abraham, and therefore the Jewish people: "Separate yourself completely and go in a different direction."

The journey that God is directing Abraham to undertake is not just a physical journey, it's a journey through history that is going to be different from anyone else's. Abraham is going to become a father to a nation that is not reckoned among the rest of the nations, a nation that dwells alone.

This is the first unique characteristic of Jewish history.

Number two we learn in the next verse:

*"I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great; and you will be a blessing."*  
(Genesis 12:2)

This verse conveys God's promise that He will be actively involved in Jewish history: "I will make you ..."

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Blaise Pascal, the great French enlightenment philosopher, was asked by Louis XIV for proof of the supernatural, he answered, "The Jewish people, your Majesty." Why? Because he knew Jewish history and he realized that for the Jewish people to survive to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, violated all the laws of history. Can you imagine what he'd say seeing the Jews made it to the 20<sup>th</sup> century?! Jewish history is a supernatural phenomenon.

Jewish people should have never come into existence. With Abraham's wife Sarah being barren, that should have been it. Abraham would have died, and his mission would have died with him. But it didn't. A miracle happened.

Thus we learn that the Jewish people come into being miraculously and survive all of human history miraculously, outliving some of the greatest empires that ever were.

**The Jewish people are a nation with a unique mission, a nation with a unique history.**

This is so because the Jews are a nation with a unique mission, a nation with a unique history. Things happen to the Jews that don't happen to other peoples.

To live for 2000 years as a nation without a national homeland is not normal. It's unique in human history. To re-establish a homeland in the place that was yours 2000 years ago is not normal. It's unique in human history.

And number three:

*"I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and through you, will be blessed all the families of the earth."* (Genesis 12:3)

God is saying here to Abraham that he and his descendants -- the Jews -- will be under God's protection. The nations and peoples who are good to the Jews will do well. Empires and peoples that are bad to the Jews will do poorly. And the whole world is going to be changed by the Jewish people.

**You can chart the rise and fall of virtually all the civilizations in the world by how they treated the Jews.**

That is one of the great patterns of history. You can literally chart the rise and fall of virtually all the civilizations in the western world by how they treated the Jews. A part of it is supernatural for sure, whether it's Spain or Germany or Poland or America or Turkey. We will see this as we go through the timeline.

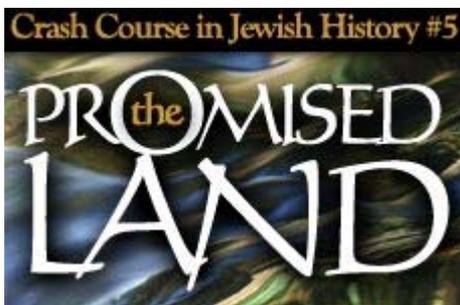
Part of it, by the way, is not so supernatural, because if you have a group of people living within your country -- an educated, driven, dedicated, loyal, creative, well-connected people -- and you're nice to them and you allow them to participate and contribute in a meaningful way, your country is going to benefit. If you crush those people and expel them, you're going to suffer, because of the economic fallout. But, of course, there's much more going on than just that.

So we have a third pattern -- that the rise and fall of nations and empires is going to be based on how they treat the Jews, which is an amazing idea, and one you can clearly demonstrate in human history.

You can see the incredibly positive impact the Jews have had on the world. The most basic of all is that the Jews have contributed the values that are now linked with democracy -- the values that come from the Torah -- respect for life, justice, equality, peace, love, education, social responsibility etc.

So from these three verses in Genesis we see the key underlying patterns of Jewish history.

Abraham's journey is the paradigm. His personal life and the life of his immediate descendants is going to be a mini-version, a microcosm, of what Jewish history is all about.



**God gave Abraham and his family the Land of Israel as a laboratory where his descendants are supposed to create the nation that's the model for the world.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The Jewish story begins in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 12, when God first speaks to Abraham, and continues through to the end with the death of Jacob and Joseph. This segment can best be described as the development of the "family" of Israel, which in the Book of Exodus will become a "nation."

In the last installment of these series we examined the patterns set into history when God sent Abraham on his journey.

Abraham had been born in Ur Kasdim in Mesopotamia (today's Iraq) then moved with his father to Haran (today's northern Syria/southern Turkey) and that is where he got the instruction to go to Canaan, the Promised Land, which will become the Land of Israel.

*God said to Abram: "Go from your land ... to the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1)*

This is a key statement and the promise is repeated several times. For example:

*On that day, God made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river the Euphrates. The land of the Kenites, Kenizites, Kadmonites; the Chitties, Perizites, Refaim; the Emorites, Canaanites, Gigashites and Yevusites." (Genesis 15:18-21)*

*"And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your temporary residence, all the land of Canaan as an eternal possession and I will be a God to them." (Genesis 17:8)*

We say that Judaism is God, Torah and the Land of Israel. The Land of Israel is not a pay off. God did not say to Abraham: Support me and if monotheism spreads throughout the world, I will give you a good piece of real estate for your own. God gave Abraham and his family the Land of Israel as a laboratory where his descendants are supposed to create the nation that's the model for the world.

## **A SPIRITUALLY SENSITIVE PLACE**

The Land of Israel is a special place; it's the only place on the planet earth where the Jewish people can achieve their mission. A model nation cannot come to be anywhere else. So, it is very important to understand the Jewish relationship with the land.

And because it's a special place, a spiritually sensitive place, a place of tremendous potential, it's also a place where one has to behave in a special manner. The Jews were only given the land because of their mission. If they abandon the mission, they lose the land. This is another very important lesson in Jewish history which is repeated, and it is also one of the most often repeated prophecies: "If you don't keep Torah, the Land will vomit you out."

**One of the most often repeated prophecies is: If you don't keep Torah, the Land will vomit you out.**

Throughout the early part of the Bible, God is constantly talking about giving the Jewish people the Land of Israel and reaffirming that commitment.

Indeed, the great 11<sup>th</sup> century Biblical commentator Rashi, asks a question of the very first sentence in the Bible: Why does God begin with the creation of the universe?

If the Bible is a book of theology for the Jews, why not begin with the creation of the Jewish nation and go immediately to the story of Exodus. That's when the Jews become a nation, get the Torah, and go into the land.

And Rashi answers, quoting an ancient oral tradition that in the future, the nations of the world will say "you are thieves" to the Jewish people. You have stolen the land from the Canaanite tribes. So God begins the Bible here at the creation of the universe to tell the world: "I am the Creator of the Universe. Everything is mine. I choose to give the Land of Israel to the Jewish people."

## **CLAIMS OF CONQUEST**

Every other nation in the world bases its claim to its land on conquest. A people came (for example, the English or the Spanish) conquered the indigenous people (for example, the Indians) took the land, settled it, and called it by a new name (for example, United States of America). "Might makes right" is the historical claim of almost all nations in history. [HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)

However, the Jewish people base their claim on God's promise. It is a moral claim because God is God and God is by definition truth, and God is by definition morality. God gave the Jewish people the Land of Israel. Without that, the only claim the modern State of Israel can make is it is stronger and was able to take the land from the Arabs.

**The Bible gives the Jews a moral claim to the Land of Israel.**

This is a very important thing, and essential for the State of Israel -- which is not a religious state and often far removed from Jewish values -- to realize that the Bible gives the Jews a moral claim.

Indeed, the early founding fathers of the modern state, even if they were not religious, were deeply steeped in the realization of Biblical heritage of the Jewish people and their connection to the land. Ben Gurion had an appreciation of the necessity of anchoring a modern, even secular Israeli state in Judaism and Jewish tradition. (We'll get more on Zionism later in this series.)

## ISHMAEL

After Abraham arrives in the Promised Land, he is faced with a dilemma. His wife Sarah is barren, and she wants Abraham to have an offspring. So she suggests that Abraham take a surrogate wife, Hagar, who joined Abraham's camp when he passed through Egypt. Hagar is the daughter of the Pharaoh and she had elected to travel with Abraham as Sarah's maidservant. Great people have great servants. And so Abraham takes Hagar as his second wife and from that relationship is going to come a child by the name of Ishmael.

Ishmael will not want to carry on Abraham's mission. Ishmael will go off and found his own lineage; this is all recorded in the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 16.

In human history, we're going to have two great monotheistic faiths, which are going to appear later, after Judaism is already established for more than 2,000 years: Christianity and Islam.

**The Arabs, according to their own tradition and to the Jewish tradition, are the descendants of Ishmael.**

Islam is a religion which originated with the Arab peoples. The Arabs, according to their own tradition and according to the Jewish tradition, are the descendants of Ishmael. One of the great attributes of Arab culture is hospitality. And the Bible tells us that Abraham was famous for hospitality.

It seems therefore that even though Ishmael does not carry on Abraham's mission he can't help but be great. He's blessed. By the way, the Bible says specifically that Ishmael is going to be great and that he's going to be at odds with the rest of the civilized world.

*"You shall call his name Ishmael ... And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall live in the presence of all his brothers. (Genesis 16:11-12)*

## SUPERNATURAL BEGINNING

When it is clear that Ishmael will not carry on the mission, God tells Abraham, who is then 99, that Sarah, who is 90, is going to become pregnant. And this is how Isaac is born, supernaturally.

As we noted earlier, this is what defines the Jewish people. The Jews never should have been there. The Jews certainly shouldn't have survived, yet they did and still are here.

Before Sarah conceives God tells Abraham:

*"Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an eternal covenant to his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael ... I have bless him and I will make him fruitful and will increase him exceedingly. He will become the father of twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish My covenant with Isaac who Sarah will bear to you at this time next year."* (Genesis 17:19-21)

So Isaac is the person who will carry on the mission of Abraham, the mission of the Jews.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**History repeats itself.  
Whatever groove Abraham  
or Isaac or Jacob are going  
to carve, their descendants  
are going to get stuck in it.**

We are continuing the story of the Jewish people, which at this point in our chronology is the story of a family, taking place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE or 3,700 years ago.

We have so far covered the story of Abraham, the first Jew, who took upon himself the mission of spreading monotheism throughout the world. And his family is going to carry on this mission -- to bring the idea of God into the world and re-elevate humanity back to its ideal state.

Abraham had two sons by two different wives. Ishmael with Hagar, the Egyptian, and Isaac with Sarah, his wife who was supposed to be barren. It is Isaac who elects to follow his father's mission.

We will not take the time here to go through stories of Isaac's life as this is not a Bible series per se. What we want to focus on is the patterns that a set for the rest of Jewish history, because as we noted earlier, "the actions of the fathers are assigned to the children."

**"The actions of the fathers are assigned to the children."** The wheels of a wagon traveling on a dirt path -- or even on a stone road after a long-enough period of time -- make a groove or rut. And the problem with a rut is that once you get in it's hard to get out; we all know the expression "stuck in a rut." If you establish a good pattern, you stay in it. You establish a bad pattern, the same thing, it's hard to break.

Whatever groove Abraham or Isaac or Jacob are going to carve, for better or for worse, their descendants are going to get stuck in it.

Unless they take the trouble to fill in the grooves, put some asphalt down there, dig up the paving stones, put new ones in, which is a lot of work, they're going to be haunted by the early patterns throughout history.

## RE-RUNS

One of the great patterns we see with Isaac is a re-run of a situation that Abraham also confronted. The Book of Genesis (chapters 20 and 21) relates that Abraham went to the land of the Philistines and he lived among them for a while. But he had some problems -- for example, they tried to take his wife, Sarah.

A few years later, (Genesis, chapter 26) Isaac faces the same situation. He's living amongst the Philistines somewhere on the coastal area of Israel and they try to take his wife, Rebecca. Also his servants start to have problems with the servants of Abimelech, the King of the Philistines.

And what happens eventually? The Philistines throw Isaac out, even though he's done nothing to deserve it as far as the Bible tells us. In addition, they plug up all the wells that Isaac has dug -- an illogical act given the value of water in the arid climate of the Middle East and the difficulty of digging wells. (This demonstrates an oft-repeated pattern of the anti-Semite who hurts himself in an effort to obliterate Jewish presence.)

**Once Isaac left things went downhill for the Philistines. Their economy collapsed.**

But then something interesting happens -- Abimelech comes after Isaac and he says, "I see that we prospered because of you." Because once Isaac leaves, things go downhill for the Philistines. Their economy collapses. Nothing's going well, and the Philistines come to realize it's because of the Jews. So the king offers a treaty and asks Isaac to return.

This is the great pattern of Jewish interaction with non-Jews in history. The Jews are often invited in. The country does incredibly well because of their contribution. Then for no reason -- I'm aware of virtually no example in history of Jews ever doing anything that caused them to be hated the way we've been hated -- the country decides to throw the Jews out, undermining its own economy in the process. So the Jews are thrown out, the country suffers. This is what's going to happen over and over again. It's schizophrenia -- a love/hate relationship.

## THE TWINS

Isaac is married to Rebecca. Rebecca is pregnant with twins, and the twins are fighting in the womb already -- it's a difficult pregnancy for Rebecca. When they're born there is a rivalry between them. And what are the twins' names? Jacob and Esau.

Although they are twins, Jacob and Esau have totally different personalities and they are also physically very different. The Bible describes Esau as hairy and Jacob as smooth-skinned. Esau is a hunter, a man of action. Jacob is a scholar; he's not a man of action.

It's also clear from the narrative that Isaac is favoring Esau who is the first-born of the twins. He's a couple of minutes older but that's significant when it comes to who will be the one to inherit the family mantle.

Rebecca is clearly favoring Jacob. The Bible says that women have *binah yeserah*, an added intuitive intelligence. Over and over again in the stories of the Bible, the men make the stupid mistakes, and the women do the right thing.

When Isaac is old, he decides to give each of his sons a blessing, and, of course, he wants to give an extra-special blessing to the first-born, Esau.

**When a great man like an Isaac makes a blessing, that blessing affects spiritual forces and becomes a reality.**

When a great man like an Isaac makes a blessing, that blessing affects spiritual forces and becomes a reality.

Although Esau doesn't really want the blessing of the first-born with all the responsibility to carry on his father's mission, he does want the blessing of wealth and power which goes along with it. But Rebecca realizes that the blessing has to go to Jacob as he is the one who is willing and able to change the world in the manner of

Abraham.

So while Esau is off hunting to catch something for his father's dinner so he'll bless him, what does Rebecca do? She covers Jacob's arms with a goat skin so they will feel hairy like Esau's. And Isaac, who is blind, is fooled.

## THE SYMBOLS

It's a mistake to read the Bible stories on a simplistic, first-grade Sunday school level. This is not the story of some old, blind man who's confused by his wife and son. There are very profound things going on here.

When Isaac encounters Jacob pretending to be Esau, he remarks:

*"The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."* (Genesis 27:22)

This is because the voice symbolizes the power of the intellect, and the hands symbolize the power of action, of might and of sword.

Esau, who embodies the power of might and sword, will, through his descendants, give rise to the Roman Empire or "Edom" as the Bible calls it. And, of course, it is the Romans (as in Roman Catholic Church) that converted the world to Christianity, the other great monotheistic faith. (Later there was a split between the Roman Christians and the Eastern Orthodox Christians, and later still the Protestant Christians split off.)

So, in Esau, we see yet another example of an offshoot of the children of Abraham, who, like Ishmael, does not carry on the mission, yet becomes a great power.

Very interesting pattern going on here. This is nothing less than a cosmic struggle.

**This is nothing less than a cosmic struggle.**

These two -- Jacob and Esau -- started fighting *in utero*, and they're going to be fighting throughout history. Later, these powers coalesce; Rome gives rise to the Western culture and it continues to fight the Jewish people.

It's not an even battle ever. Rome will always be stronger in the physical sense, but the Jews will be stronger in the intellectual, spiritual sense. So we see that this is where the struggle begins and it's going to carry on throughout all of history.

## AMALEK

The descendants of Abraham can't help but be great; even if they don't become Jews they become people who have a huge impact on the world. Indeed, the greatest enemies of the Jews come from within the family.

Who is the ultimate enemy of the Jewish people in history? The nation of Amalek. This is the people that symbolize evil, and there is a commandment in the Bible to wipe them off the face of the earth, because their pathological hatred for Jews is so great, if they have a chance they will wipe the Jews off the face of the earth.

The nation of Amalek, the Bible tells us, comes into being when a son of Esau takes for a concubine a woman named Timna, who may have been his daughter. (See Genesis 36:10-12.) From this union came Amalek, the patriarch of a nation with a pathological hatred of the Jew.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who wrote the chief work of the Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, some 2,000 years, said that "Esau hates Jacob is the way of the world." These are the laws of physics, so to speak, that describe the interaction between the Jews and descendants of Esau. No matter what happens, the descendants of Esau are going to hate the Jews.

So we have a confrontation between Esau and Jacob. Jacob steals the blessing and then Esau shows up and finds out what happened. And patriarch Isaac realizes that he's been tricked. He's not angry, however, because he sees now that Jacob is capable of action and can carry on the mission.

Now Rebecca, realizing that Esau's resentment will only grow until he going to want to kill his brother, sends Jacob away. She tells him to go to Haran where she tells Jacob to take a wife.

## MR. WHITE

In Haran lives Laban -- *Lavan*, in Hebrew, meaning "white" -- Rebecca's ne'er-do-well brother. His name points up God's sense of humor -- Mr. White turns out to be one of the biggest crooks in the Bible. Jacob turns up penniless on his uncle's doorstep and falls in love with his cousin Rachel. He wants to marry her but Laban insists he work seven years for her hand. At the end of the seven years, Laban substitutes Rachel's older sister Leah and demands Jacob work another seven years to get Rachel. In the end, Jacob winds up with four wives -- Leah, Rachel, and their handmaidens Zilpah and Bilhah and he has 12 sons and 1 daughter.

Unlike previous generations, all the sons are going to be totally dedicated to the mission. They are the core group -- an extended family that is going to make the nation that is going to change the world.

**Jacob then  
realizes that he  
has to go back to  
the Land of Israel  
because he has a  
mission.**

Despite Laban's attempts to keep him dependent and working for peanuts, Jacob manages to accumulate a big fortune, which becomes another great pattern in Jewish history. The Jew with his hands tied behind his back, when given the slightest opportunity will do remarkably well, even in a very hostile business environment.

Jacob then realizes that he has to go back to the Land of Israel because he has a mission. Just as Abraham knew that this was the only place where Jewish potential could be realized, so too Jacob realizes that this is the only place to be. So he gathers up all his belongings and he heads back.

## **REUNION**

And this brings us to another scene which becomes a powerful pattern in Jewish history. The re-uniting of Jacob and Esau.

As he makes his way home, Jacob hears that Esau is coming out to meet him with an army of 400 men. In response, always using his brains, he sends gifts.

They meet. Esau doesn't try and kill Jacob although it's very clear that he still hates him. He says, "My brother, it's good to have you back. You come with me to Har Sa'ir, where I live and we'll go into business together. With your brains and my brawn we'll dominate the whole Middle East."

There's no question, if these two had united as a team, what a force they would have had in human history. Imagine the physical power of the Romans linked with the spiritual and intellectual power of the Jews.

But Jacob says, "You go ahead of me. I'll catch up later." Now we know from the narrative Jacob never goes to Har Sa'ir to live with Esau.

The great biblical commentator Rashi explains, quoting the Prophet Ovadiah, that they will meet again -- at the end of days. In effect, Jacob, representing the great intellectual, spiritual force in human history, is saying to Esau, the great physical force: "I give you permission to go on ahead and dominate human history physically. But at the end of days, when the 'lion lies down with the lamb,' then we'll get together. Then the Jews will be on top."

This doesn't mean in the end Jews are going to conquer the world and make a great empire. In the end, the whole world will come to recognize one God and live with one standard of morality in peace and brotherhood. The Jewish mission will be fulfilled then, but in the meantime, Esau is going to be on top.

Ultimately the struggle of history will be between Jewish ideas and the ideas of Esau and the culture that he's going to create in human history. That's the cosmic battle: good versus evil. This is a very powerful idea and the dominating pattern of Jewish history.

# Joseph

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The story of Joseph demonstrates a classic historic pattern of the Jew in Diaspora. The Jew arrives impoverished, works hard despite deprivation, and rises to the top.**

Had Jacob married Rachel as he had intended -- instead of being tricked into marrying Leah -- Joseph would have likely been his first-born son. Although he was Jacob's 11<sup>th</sup> son, he dominates the narrative of the 12 brothers, and, in his story, we see a great many historical patterns.

To begin with, Joseph has a key position in the family as a result of his being the long-awaited first child of Jacob's favorite wife. His father seems to be showing him a considerable amount of favoritism -- he buys him a special coat -- and this engenders jealousy from his brothers.

However, it would be a mistake to view their behavior simplistically, as typical of a dysfunctional family. While these people without a doubt make mistakes, spiritually they are on an incredibly high level. So we have to look deeply at what is really going on here.

Joseph is having dreams and he interprets those dreams. As we learn, he has a special gift for dream interpretation, and his dreams and interpretations are accurate and prophetic. He tells his brothers, for example, that one day they will bow to him (which does indeed happen some years later).

The brothers conclude that Joseph must be the bad apple in their generation and decide to get rid of him.

But to his brothers his dreams appear to verge on megalomania. And since they know that they are the team that's supposed to change the world, they think he is endangering the whole future of humanity. They know the family history -- that in each generation there was one "bad apple" -- first Ishmael, then Esau. So they conclude that Joseph must be the bad one in this generation.

They contemplate killing him, but instead they sell him into slavery. They take his fancy coat, smear it with goat's blood and present it to Jacob as if Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

Meanwhile, Joseph is taken by a caravan of Ishmaelites to Egypt, where he becomes a slave in the household of a nobleman named Potiphar.

## **EGYPTIAN EMPIRE**

At this juncture, we have to consider what Egypt was like at this time in history when it was the second of the two great civilizations in existence. (The first was the Mesopotamian civilization which we described in Part 3 of this series.)

Egypt at that time was mostly desert except for the Nile River. The Nile is the greatest river in the world, and if it didn't flow through Egypt the country would be just sand. In ancient times only 3% of Egypt was inhabitable, arable land.

Because of its natural defenses, Egypt was totally isolated and virtually impossible to invade. (The Hyksos, invaded it once, the Assyrians also, then finally Alexander the Great. But that's only three times in 3,000 years.) Egypt was the most static, longest-surviving civilization in human history. And it virtually didn't change. You think about how little Egypt changed in 3,000 years and how much the modern world has changed in even a few hundred years. It's mind-boggling how stable that society was and to a large extent it's due to its geography.

**The Great Pyramid of Khufu covers 13 acres in area, is 500 feet high and built of 5 million tons of stone.** Although we don't have exact dates for the beginning of the Egyptian civilization, it is believed to have started in the Early Bronze period, around 3300 BCE. It was a very sophisticated culture, considering the feats of engineering that the pyramids represent. The Great Pyramid of Khufu, known as "Cheops," is the largest ever built, 13 acres in area, almost 500 feet high, of 5 million tons of stone; and it was built by people who did not have any iron tools. We have no idea how they did it. They obviously had tremendously sophisticated stone cutting techniques and engineering knowledge, enabling them to move large blocks of stone. They had pulleys, they had levers, they had a lot of muscle power.

It's estimated that Cheops took 100,000 men and thirty years to build. Why spend so much effort on building a tomb? Because the Egyptians were also spiritually sophisticated. It was a dark spirituality but not to be lightly dismissed. They were preoccupied with death, which is why they perfected mummification, and their holy book was called the Book of the Dead. How's that for a lively read?

They believed that Pharaoh was a living god, he had absolute power, and that Pharaoh's position in the after-life would affect how the whole of Egypt would do. So you had to make a really good tomb for him, and you had to give him the right gifts, and you had to make sure that he got into the after-life correctly, otherwise things would go badly for everybody. Which is why it was a national project of the entire Egyptian people to create such extra-ordinary tombs for the Pharaohs.

Of course, this very sophisticated culture was antithetical to Judaism as is humanly possible, because it practiced idolatry. They worshipped 2,000 different gods in ancient Egypt. Gods with hippo heads, and falcon heads, and crocodile heads. This was a civilization that was idolatrous to the extreme -- very religious and spiritual in its own sense and yet very idolatrous at the same time. They were not primitive or superstitious or stupid; they understood spiritual power and were a very sophisticated people who truly believed in the power of idolatry.

Egypt, besides being a place of idolatry, was also a place of immorality -- a very licentious place.

So to throw young Joseph into this environment is bad news. Very bad news.

## **A SLAVE RISES TO THE TOP**

Separated from the influence of his family at an early age, Joseph has a major disadvantage for a licentious society -- he is very handsome. And his master's wife, Mrs. Potiphar, finds him very attractive.

Besides that, Joseph has a lot going for him -- he is very smart and hardworking and he rises from his position as lowly teenage servant to head of Potiphar's household. This is the classic historic pattern of the Jew in the Diaspora -- he comes in impoverished, deals with a bad situation, works hard, rises to the top.

Now Potiphar's wife is not happy that Joseph refuses her advances. Eventually, she picks a time when everyone is out of the house attending a national celebration and she tries to rip his clothes off. He runs away. She screams rape.

Mr. Potiphar comes home. It is obvious that he doesn't believe his wife because otherwise he would have Joseph killed on the spot. Instead, he throws him into prison.

So here Joseph, who was the head servant, is on the bottom again. This is the Jew in the Diaspora. We come into a country, we rise, then we're thrown out. We start at the bottom somewhere else. Joseph is now in prison and he rises very quickly to be the head prisoner. He's running the whole place. This again is the Jew.

**Thrown into prison, Joseph rises very quickly to be the head prisoner.**

Into prison is thrown Pharaoh's wine steward and Pharaoh's baker. And they have dreams. Now as we know Joseph is the master dream interpreter, and therefore it's not surprising that Joseph interprets these dreams and he tells the wine steward that the Pharaoh is going to reinstate him into his position, and he tells the baker that he's going to lose his head. And that's exactly what happens.

#### **PHARAOH'S DREAMS**

Then the Pharaoh himself has a couple of disturbing dreams. He dreams of seven fat cows coming out of the Nile and being devoured by seven thin cows. And then he has another dream of seven fat sheaves of wheat being devoured by seven thin sheaves of wheat. And he's very disturbed. And believe me, if living-god-on-earth-Pharaoh can't sleep, no one in Egypt sleeps.

The Pharaoh wakes up all his magicians and his soothsayers and his astrologers and none of them can figure out what the dream was about, and then the wine steward says, "I remember, there was this Jewish kid in prison who interprets dreams."

Now this, by the way, is the ultimate Jewish success story. They take Joseph out of prison; they shower him, shave him and bring him before Pharaoh. When he hears the dream, Joseph tells the Pharaoh: "There's going to be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine."

"What should I do?" asks the Pharaoh. And Joseph says, "You'd better stockpile all the grain in Egypt so that when the famine hits you'll have what to eat." Pharaoh says, "You thought of it, you do it."

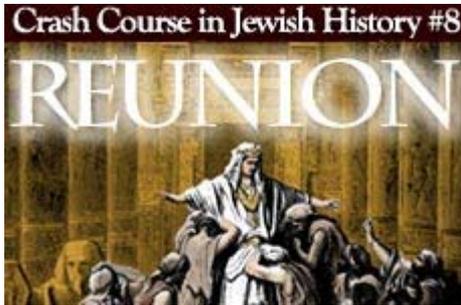
**Joseph becomes Viceroy of Egypt, for all practical purposes the most powerful man in the empire.**

And this is how Joseph becomes Viceroy, for all practical purposes the most powerful man in the whole land in terms of infrastructure of Egypt, the most powerful empire at the time. How's that for promotion -- from prisoner to viceroy. And he marries -- Osnat, the daughter of Potiphar.

Before the famine hits he has two children, Menashe and Ephraim. To this day, observant Jews bless their children every Friday night to be like Ephraim and Menashe. Why? First, unlike all the previous brothers in the Bible -- Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau -- they love each other and are not jealous of

each other's accomplishments. Second, because these kids grow up as sons of the Viceroy, they could have been totally assimilated, spoiled, Egyptian brats, yet it's very clear that they grow up completely loyal proto-Jews in an incredibly hostile environment.

Now that Joseph is Viceroy the stage is set for his early dreams to come true, when he saw his brothers bowing before him. And this is indeed what happens next.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**Joseph realizes that through the generations, the family has created a rut of hatred among the brothers. To remedy the situation, he sets the stage for a great test.**

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An interesting thing happens in the Bible right in the middle of the Joseph story. Suddenly the story stops. We leave off Joseph and return to the land of Canaan to pick up the story of Judah, the fourth oldest of the 12 brothers. And it is not immediately clear why we need to be informed of this slice out of Judah's life at this point in the narrative. (See Book of Genesis, Chapter 38.)

We learn that Judah had three sons and the oldest married a woman named Tamar. He died. Then, according to Jewish law, the second son married Tamar. He also died. Tamar is in line to marry the third son, but Judah stalls. Realizing Judah will not honor the law, and seeing herself growing older and childless, Tamar decides to take the matters into her own hands.

As the Bible tells it, she disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces Judah, who promises her a goat in payment for her services. She holds onto his staff and seal as collateral, but when he arrives with the goat, the "prostitute" is nowhere to be found.

**It is discovered  
that Tamar is  
pregnant and she  
is sentenced to**

**death for her promiscuity.** Shortly thereafter, it is discovered that Tamar is pregnant and she is sentenced to death for her promiscuity. Despite her situation, she does not embarrass Judah by revealing that he is the father of her unborn child. Instead, she sends the staff and seal with the request, "Please, recognize to whom this belongs."

These are the very words that Judah had spoken to his father Jacob, when -- after having sold Joseph into slavery -- he and his brothers took Joseph's coat and smeared it with the blood of a goat. They had claimed at the time that Joseph must have been devoured by wild animals.

With the words that remind him of his great sin echoing in his head, Judah confesses, "She is more righteous than I."

Through his admission of guilt, Judah becomes the first person in the Bible to accept responsibility willingly, thereby becoming the archetypal example of sincere and wholehearted repentance. In this he is the model Jewish leader, and the mantle of kingship will forever after belong to the tribe of Judah. His descendants will be King David and King Solomon, as well as the prophesied Messiah. Indeed, the Jews are called Jews after Judah.

The stage is now set for the repentance of the brothers and their reunion with Joseph.

## **THE FAMINE**

Meanwhile, the famine hits. And it doesn't just affect Egypt but the entire ancient Middle East, and Egypt -- thanks to Joseph's foresight -- is the only place that has storehouses of grain.

Jacob sends the brothers shopping. But he keeps Benjamin, Joseph's full brother and the only surviving child of his favorite wife Rachel, at home, because he does not want to risk losing him.

The brothers arrive to Egypt. They bow before the Viceroy, not realizing that this is their long-lost brother whom they had sold into slavery. After all, Joseph dresses like an Egyptian, walks like an Egyptian, talks like an Egyptian.

Now Joseph realizes that through the generations, the family has created a rut of hatred among the brothers. And he realizes that it is time to get rid of that, and that the only way to do that is by repentance.

The Jewish way of repentance is that you find yourself in the same situation, but you don't repeat that mistake. You show that you've changed.

Joseph realizes that he now has a great chance to put his brothers back in the same situation.

## **THE TEST**

So first, he accuses them of being spies. They insist they are not spies, they are just brothers of a family, that they have a father and a brother back home.

If that is true, says Joseph, go back and bring the other brother.

They are now starting to figure out that this is all happening to them because of what they did to Joseph. And now they have to bring Benjamin -- they know that if something happens to him, it's going to kill their father.

**Joseph plants a silver cup in Benjamin's bag, and accuses all the brothers of stealing.**

But Joseph insists and makes them go back and bring back Benjamin. Then he plants a silver cup in Benjamin's bag, and accuses them all of stealing. However, he offers to let the brothers go free and only punish Benjamin by taking him into slavery.

This is the test -- will they turn their backs on their brother to save themselves?

But they have become different people and they will not make the same mistake again. Judah argues passionately and offers himself into slavery in place of Benjamin.

With that Joseph starts to cry and reveals his true identity at last: "I am Joseph, is my father still alive?"

This is one of the great moments in the Bible as the brothers stare in shock at their long-lost brother, now an Egyptian Viceroy.

## **DIVINE PLAN**

And then Joseph makes what is clearly one of the most significant statements in terms of understanding Jewish history:

*"Now do not worry, and do not be angry with yourselves that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that God sent me before you. For it is two years that there has been famine in the land; and for another five years there will be no plowing or harvest. God sent me here before you to insure your survival in the land to keep you alive for a great deliverance. It was not you that sent me here, but God and he made me as a father to Pharaoh and master of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt."(Genesis 45:5-8)*

One of the greatest sayings of the rabbis which explains Jewish history is the idea of "God puts the cure before the disease."

At the beginning of these series, we discussed the idea of history as a controlled process with a goal. Our decisions make a difference but we're promised that we'll get our destined end. Therefore, regardless of what path we take, God will always make sure that His goals are met. He will put the pieces into place. Now as events are unfolding, we don't see where and how the pieces fit but when it's all over we can see everything had a reason.

Joseph, who was a very intelligent person with a tremendous faith in God, realized that his enslavement was part of a Divine plan, that he had to go to Egypt, because this was all part of this huge cosmic historical process.

## **JIGSAW PUZZLE**

Jewish history is like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Six thousand pieces. Every piece is a year. And there is no box with the picture on the cover to let you see what it'll look like at the end? To get the first few pieces into place -- as Joseph is doing -- it takes enormous effort. But as you go further and further a couple of things

happen: The picture comes together, everything begins to fit, there are no extraneous pieces, and the closer you get to the end, the easier it is.

**Everything fits.  
There are no  
accidents. That's  
human history  
and certainly  
Jewish history.**

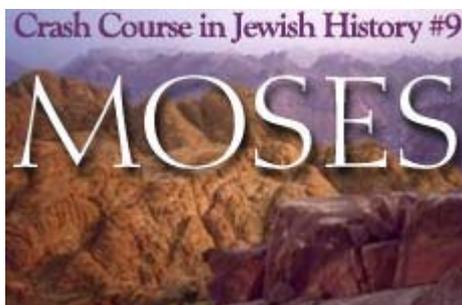
That's human history and certainly Jewish history. Everything fits. There are no accidents. It all comes together. Everything has a purpose and when it's done you look back and see that it all makes sense, it all fits.

Joseph sees that. He sends word back to his father, and Jacob is overjoyed. He thought his son has been dead for all these years. And they have a dramatic reunion. All of Egypt comes out to see the Viceroy's family. And they are all bowing to Joseph in fulfillment of the prophecy.

Then the Pharaoh invites the whole family to come live in Egypt. And they do. The Bible says that 70 individuals entered Egypt consisting of Jacob, his 12 sons, their wives and children. The proto-Jewish nation arrived in Egypt.

And again, this is a great pattern of Jews arriving in a Diaspora country. They're welcomed in. They're given the best real estate in the land of Goshen. They settle there happily and prosper. Everything seems to be going great until the Egyptians see they are doing a little too well for comfort.

But when the Book of Genesis ends -- with the deaths of Jacob and Joseph -- everything is still okay. The problems are waiting to come in the Book of Exodus.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**In an all-time irony of ironies, the savior of the Jewish people is raised in the house of the ultimate enemy of the Jews.**

The Exodus story is certainly one of the most significant events in Jewish history. It is a model -- in microcosm -- for what happens later. We see again and again the roller-coaster ride from high points to low. Generally, the higher the Jews manage to rise, the lower they fall.

The story of Exodus recounts the Jews going from a good situation (as when they were welcomed into Egypt by the Pharaoh himself) to a very bad situation (when they were enslaved) to the highest heights, the pinnacles of spirituality (when they were freed from slavery by God Himself and given the Torah at Mount Sinai).

**Assuming that  
each family had  
12 children, in  
five generations**

**there would be 3 million people or more.** At the point in time when the Exodus story begins the family of 70 individuals that arrived in Egypt at the time of Joseph has grown to a nation of about 3 million people. This is not as far-fetched as it may seem. All you have to do is assume that each family had 12 children (as did Jacob and as is happening today in ultra-Orthodox families in Israel) and you can easily compute that in five generations there will be this many people if not more. This is far from the most supernatural thing to happen in Jewish history.

The rapid multiplication of the Jews has made the Egyptians nervous -- "there are too many of them, what if they rise up against us" -- and the Pharaoh issues a genocidal decree: Kill all the Jewish boys. (This is a classic anti-Semitic pattern -- the Jew in Diaspora is always loyal to his host country, yet can never escape unfounded suspicion of treachery.)

At this point, baby Moses is born. His parents decide to hide him, but after a few months they realize that very shortly they will be found out. So his mother, in order to save him somehow, puts him in a waterproof basket and floats it down the Nile. As we all know, he is saved by none other than the daughter of Pharaoh.

Irony of ironies? It's all part of the plan. As noted earlier, God puts the cure before the disease. This is another classic case.

It does give one pause though -- that the savior of the Jewish people is going to be raised in the house of the ultimate enemy of the Jews. The only modern equivalent would be of some fellow who is meant to overthrow Nazi Germany being raised as Adolf Hitler's adopted grandson. That's what we have here. You realize what a wild story this is if you imagine it in a modern context.

## **EGYPTIAN HISTORY**

By the way, who is the Pharaoh in the story here?

The events of Exodus happened circa 1314-1313 BCE if we translate Jewish chronology into the Christian dating system the world uses today. But that may be misleading. For one thing, the Egyptian chronologies we use in modern world history have only been calculated in the last century by scholars who tried to estimate the reigns of the kings of Egypt and Assyria, two of the oldest empires in the world. There's a huge amount of educated guesswork involved in these chronologies. If you open any books on ancient Egypt you'll get lots of different opinions as to when different Pharaohs reigned.

Generally, the Pharaohs associated with the Exodus are Seti and Rameses. Rameses II was certainly the great builder of this period of time. And it's interesting that the Bible says that the Jewish slaves built the cities of Pitom and Ramses. (See Exodus 1:11.) Of course, it took them 116 years to build these cities so that covers the reign of more than one Pharaoh.

**After Rameses,  
Egyptian history  
records a ten-year  
period of chaos,  
which would fit  
with the ten**

**plagues.** Now what's fascinating is that after Rameses there was a ten-year period of chaos in Egypt; this much we know from available records. This would fit if Egypt was, in fact, destroyed by ten supernatural plagues; they would be in bad state for a number of years afterwards. So there we have some evidence of it.

The Pharaoh who reigned after Rameses is named Merenptah and he ruled from the late 13th to early 12th century BCE. Now what's most interesting is that there was found an inscription from his reign which is today called the "Israel Stele." On that stele is a record of Merenptah's campaigning in the area of Canaan, the Sinai/Israel area. And it's the first extra-Biblical mention of "Israel" anywhere in human history. We're talking about something that's around 3,200 years old. And this would correspond in Jewish chronology to some time after the Exodus story.

What does the stele say? "Israel is a widow. Her seed is no more." That is, we've wiped out the Jewish people, they're gone. This means:

1) The Egyptians lie when they record things. Jews are here today 3,200 years later, they hardly wiped the Jews out; in fact, they're gone. (This is not surprising as the ancient people are notorious for lying in their official records to make their rulers look good.)

2) At this early time in history, corresponding to the time when the Jews just entered the Promised Land, we have concrete references to a people called Israel in the records of another country. This is very significant piece of archeology.

## **PRINCE OF EGYPT**

Moses grows up as the grandson of Pharaoh, who is then (whoever he was) the most powerful human being on earth, being the ruler of the mightiest nation on earth.

Moses could easily have grown up to be a totally assimilated, totally spoilt Egyptian kid. But the Pharaoh's daughter has hired his own mother as his nanny and so he never loses the connection to the Jewish people.

It is no surprise therefore that, when one day he sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Jew, he cannot stand it and he kills the taskmaster. Then, of course, some Jews inform on him, which is another classic case we're going to see in Jewish history -- Jews informing on other Jews. And Moses has to flee for his life.

He goes to the land of Midian, which is across the Sinai Peninsula. There he meets Jethro, an excommunicated priest who has several daughters, one of whom Moses marries. His wife's name is Tziporah, and the Bible describes her as being black. Moses has two sons, Gershon and Eliezer, (about whom we don't hear much) and he becomes a shepherd.

**Today, being a shepherd is not considered an acceptable occupation for a**

**good Jewish boy.** In this regard he follows the example of the other great leaders of the Jewish people; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons were all shepherds. So, we have to ask: Why were so many Jewish leaders shepherds?

Now if you've ever watched shepherds at work, you might have noticed that most of them sit around doing nothing except daydreaming. A shepherd has a lot of time to think, and this is an absolute prerequisite for being a prophet. To elevate oneself to the highest level, where one transcends the physical reality and enters a higher dimension of communicating with the Infinite, requires a huge amount of work, and a lot of time to think.

Another reason why Jewish leaders were shepherds has to do with the fact that the work of a shepherd is practice for dealing with large groups of living creatures. Leading the Jews is the hardest job on the planet. One of the great lessons that we need to learn from Jewish history is the difficulty and the challenges of unifying and trying to lead the most individualistic nation on the earth. Being a shepherd is good practice for this daunting task.

## THE BURNING BUSH

While Moses is tending the sheep, he has a vision of the burning bush.

The story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush is incredibly profound and laden with many deep meanings, but for our purposes in analyzing Jewish history we will consider the burning bush as synonymous with the Jewish people.

The burning bush is burning, but it is never consumed by fire. So, too, the Jewish people seem to be forever on the verge of being destroyed yet we always survive. On another level, we could say that the Jewish people are burning with the fire of Torah, with an ideology that is going to change the world.

When Moses encounters God at the burning bush, God identifies Himself repeatedly (Exodus 3:6, 3:13, 3:15, 3:16, 4:5) as the God of his forefathers -- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with whom He had made an eternal covenant.

This is an extremely important passage because later on in Jewish history a lot of different people are going to come -- the Christians, for example -- claiming that God changed His mind, abandoned the Jews and made a new covenant (new "testament" to use the Greek term) with them.

But God made an "eternal" covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and He renews the deal at several intervals. We learn that God has a master plan for humanity and the Jews have an absolutely essential part in that plan.

**God made an "eternal" covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and He renews the deal at several intervals.**

At this juncture, God has decided to bring the Jews out of Egypt. And it's important to keep in mind that God put the Jews in Egypt in the first place -- that God is responsible for the bad things and good things that happen.

It says in the Talmud, you have to bless the bad as well as the good. When a person dies, the observant Jew will say "blessed is the true Judge," because everything God does is part of a plan, even though we don't always see what that is. Sometimes He puts people into a bad

situation so they can accomplish their mission on earth. It's not just that the bad things are the product of "the devil" and the good things are from God.

So, in effect, we come to understand that Egypt served as a womb, where the Jews were formed as a nation in a very difficult situation, so that when they were ready, God could bring them out and establish a special relationship with them.

God tells this to Moses in effect and then commands, "Go back and tell Pharaoh to let My people go."

## "LET MY PEOPLE GO"

As commanded, Moses goes back down to Egypt, confronts the Pharaoh with his brother Aaron, and he says, "The God of my forefathers told me to tell you: 'Let My people go.'" And in response, the Pharaoh is incredulous "What are you talking about? Who is this God? I don't know him."

**The Egyptians had around 2,000 gods, but they didn't have a laptop to do a "god-search."**

The ancient Egyptians had around 2,000 gods. They took their spirituality and knowledge of the spiritual world very seriously. Since they didn't have a laptop to do a "god-search," their priests started furiously flipping through their lists of the different gods and couldn't find the God that Moses was invoking.

The notion of one, infinite, all-powerful God was an idea that was incomprehensible to the ancient polytheistic people -- it simply did not fit with their fragmented way of viewing the world.

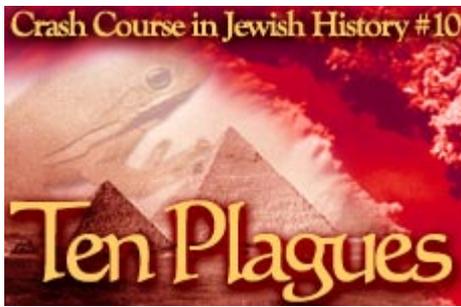
When the Pharaoh won't listen, what does Moses do? He takes his staff and he throws it down and it turns into a snake.

The Pharaoh is not impressed. His magicians can do the same thing.

It is very important to stress that the ancient world understood spirituality in the way we cannot even fathom today. Today we talk about magic, but magic for us is illusion, not a manipulation of the forces of nature as they were able to do.

It is a fundamental idea of Judaism that there's a spiritual reality, and that there's a physical reality. You can transcend the physical into the spiritual; you can use the spiritual to manipulate the physical. And you can do this by accessing the dark forces or the light forces. And the Egyptians were able to access the dark forces and they knew how to turn a stick into a snake, so they were not impressed by what Moses did.

But Moses was just getting started.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**Most miracles are natural phenomena with awesomely good timing. The Ten Plagues are a notable exception. Here the laws of nature are turned upside down to help free the Jews.**

Once the plagues hit Egypt -- blood, lice, frogs, etc. -- the devastation continues for over a year. Each plague is an open miracle, because each one represents a fantastic manipulation of nature. The laws of nature are turned upside down to help the Jews.

Open miracles are a very important part of early Jewish history. After the destruction of the First Temple they're going to cease, although arguably the Jews couldn't have survived this long without continual hidden miracles.

**Why did God choose to set the Jewish people free through this very long drawn out process?**

The obvious question we must ask when we examine The Plagues is why? Why did God choose to set the Jewish people free through this very long, drawn-out process? If He wanted, God, an all-powerful being that He is, could have made all the Egyptians drop dead on the first encounter with Moses, or He could have frozen them in place, then all the Jews could have packed up and left in five minutes.

To explain why the Ten Plagues had to be, we need to first explain the Jewish view of miracles in general.

Judaism holds that nature does not act independently of God, but, at the same time, God created the laws of nature and does not interfere with them. God is certainly capable of doing whatever He likes, but He doesn't play around with the physical world and its workings. Therefore, most miracles are natural phenomena with awesomely good timing.

But to this rule, the Ten Plagues are a notable exception.

## **A TOTAL EXCEPTION**

Unlike the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea or Reed Sea -- *Yam Suf* -- could be explained as a natural event with great timing.

Several years ago two oceanographers documented that every 2,500 years or so the right combination of winds and tide will cause the ocean to split over the area of the Red Sea today. Unlike the movie version, where the Red Sea splits in a matter of minutes, the Bible story relates a lengthy process -- just as documented -- of the wind blowing all night and by the morning there's a dry place to walk through.

Napoleon, 200 years ago, witnessed a similar phenomenon.

Can you imagine if that happened to you? Right at the time you needed to cross a body of water it splits for you overnight. If an event that occurs statistically once every 2,500 years happened for you, just when you

needed it, you wouldn't say, "Ah, that's a good, interesting combination of winds and tides." You'd say, "Oh my God, a miracle!" That's what's happening in most cases of miracles in the Bible.

However, there is no natural explanation for the Ten Plagues. The Ten Plagues are a clear example of God flipping the laws of nature on its end.

We have hail -- which should be frozen -- that is on fire; we have darkness so dense that no one can see or move; things that happened to Egyptians not happening to Jews. All supernatural stuff. Why? Here is the reason:

**The whole essence of idolatry is the belief that every force in nature has a god that controls it.** The whole essence of idolatry is the belief that every force in nature has a god that controls it. In Egypt they worshipped the Nile god, the sun god, the cat god, the sheep god, etc. The Ten Plagues were designed by God to flip all the laws of nature on end to demonstrate -- not just for the Jewish people but for all of humanity, for all of history -- that He alone controls all of nature, all of the physical world, and that there is nothing outside of His control.

If we examine the plagues carefully we can readily see that each one was designed to show God's control of all forces in nature: water and earth, fire and ice, insects, reptiles and mammals, light and darkness, and finally, life and death.

## ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Do we have evidence for the Ten Plagues in archeological records?

As noted in the last installment in this series there is recorded a ten-year period in Egyptian history (right around this time) when chaos reigned. There are other oblique references, the most famous being the Ipuwer Papyrus. This is actually a series of papyri, which describe various cataclysmic events in Egypt -- blood everywhere, people dying etc.

Immanuel Velikovsky uses the Ipuwer Papyrus as the basis for his book, *Worlds in Collision*, in which he argues that the whole Exodus story is true, but that the plagues happened because a comet came close to the earth. He says the dust from the comet turned the water red, and the pull of the comet's gravitational field split the sea, etc.

However, if you read the Bible, you see that with the plague of blood, it's not just water turning a "dusty red." The Midrash also tells us that Egyptians perish from this bloody water but not the Jews.

**Despite the plagues, there is an amazing amount of resistance from the Egyptians to let the Jews leave.** Despite that, there is an amazing amount of resistance on the part of the Egyptians -- not just the Pharaoh, but the whole of Egypt -- to let the Jews leave. It is classic anti-Semitism, "I don't care if I take my whole country down as long as I can take the Jews with me." This actually is a very common historical pattern. You'll see this certainly when we get to Hitler -- they needed the trains to supply the Eastern Front, but they diverted them to ship Jews to Auschwitz. They were losing the war, but their main energy still went,

not to win, not to even save themselves, but to kill the Jews.

Finally, finally, after the death of the first-born, the Pharaoh says, "Go!"

The Jews leave, the sea splits, the Egyptians follow and they drown. That's the final great event until ... Mount Sinai.



**The encounter between God and the Jews at Mount Sinai was a totally unique event in all of human history.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

Passover is often described as the holiday of freedom. And in liberal democracies freedom is often misunderstood as the ability to do whatever you like with no oppressive authority telling you what to do. But that is not how the Bible and Judaism define freedom.

The Jewish idea of freedom is best summarized by that very famous expression -- "Praise the servants of God who are not servants of Pharaoh." That is, freedom is seen as a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. It is being free from an oppressive authority in order to stand at Mount Sinai and commit to a certain responsibility.

What happened at Mount Sinai?

To answer quite simply, the Jewish people -- every man, woman and child -- had an encounter with God.

It was a totally unique event in all of human history. The Bible itself states in Deuteronomy 4:33 that this never happened any place else. You can check all history books, you'll never find a similar story of God speaking to an entire people.

All other claims about revelation in human history are based on the experience of one individual or at best a small group of initiates. For example, Islam is founded on the teachings of Mohammed who said that God spoke to him in a cave and revealed the teachings contained in the Koran to him.

**The Jewish claim is the one claim that cannot be faked.**

The notion of an entire people having an encounter with God is unique to Judaism. And it's the one claim that cannot be faked. So for example, I can claim that I had a vision last night and God spoke to me, and if I'm charismatic enough and you are gullible enough you might believe I am a prophet. But I can't convince you that you saw something that *you* know you didn't see.

Jews say that we have kept the Torah for thousands of years, not because of miracles or any other supernatural phenomena of Jewish history, but because we *all* stood at Mount Sinai and heard God speak and for generation after generation that very fact was passed down.

The story of the survival of the Jewish people is going to be to a large extent the story of what's called *shalsholet hakabala* -- the transmission process of Torah from one generation to the next.

## A NATION IS BORN

At Mount Sinai the Jewish people become a nation. Again, this is a unique event which says a lot about the Jewish people. What's so unique about it?

Well, consider how the French became "the French." Did they all wake up one morning to collectively decide they liked white wine and blue cheese and they were going to speak French? No. It was a long process. As with every other nation, this process involved a people living in a specific geographic area for an extended period of time and evolving a common language and a common culture born of a shared historical experience. Eventually, this people developed a political entity and government (with a king at its head) and they defined their boundaries, flew a flag, minted coins and called themselves France.

**We become a nation under the most adverse conditions designed to erase any cultural or historical identity.**

For Jews the process of becoming a nation started outside their national homeland -- in fact while in bondage and under the most adverse conditions designed to erase any cultural or historical identity. Jews did not become a nation by pledging allegiance to the State of Israel. A scraggly band of escaped slaves became a nation standing at the foot of Mount Sinai and saying to God: "We will do and we will listen" -- that is, pledging to fulfill the commandments of the Torah and with time to understand the mission that came with it.

Just as Abraham said, many, many generations earlier, "I choose to live, and if necessary to die, for the reality of God," so too these descendants of Abraham made the same commitment.

That's how the Jews became the Nation of Israel.

This is why we say that Judaism is not just a religion -- it's a national identity. Being a Jew is not the same as being a Christian. Christianity is purely a religious belief. You could be British, American, French and still be a Christian.

Not so the Jews.

The Jews can certainly become citizens of the countries in which they live and they often look and act like everyone else, but all the while, they and everyone else knows they are different. If they choose to deny this fact, the rest of the world will always remind them of it.

Being a Jew is being part of a distinct people and a nation, which does have a land, does have a language, does have a history and a world mission.

Most importantly, Jews have a specific relationship with God which is not just a religious/spiritual thing, it's an all-encompassing view of the world -- how to live every second of life -- which is unique in the world.

The Jewish national identity was forged by the experience at Mount Sinai where we committed to a mission, and a specific way of life to be lived in accordance with the commandments of the Torah, which is the guidebook for accomplishing that mission on a personal and national level.

## THE ULTIMATE SCRIBE

After the original revelation, Moses spent 40 days listening to God talking to him, dictating to him the 613 commandments of the Torah (which are encapsulated in Ten Statements, the so-called "Ten Commandments") and also the principles how to apply these commandments (which are referred to as the Oral Law).

Note that the Oral Law was given first. And the Oral Law has been exclusively in the domain of the Jews. The Christians adopted the Written Law -- the Torah and other parts of the Hebrew Bible as part of their scriptures -- but the Oral Law stayed uniquely Jewish. Because it is the Oral Law that tells us how to live as Jews.

**I cannot emphasize strongly enough how significant the Oral Law is. You can't live as a Jew without it.** I cannot emphasize strongly enough how significant the Oral Law is. One can't live as a Jew without it. It's going to become a very important issue when we look at splinter sects in Judaism later on in Jewish history.

**strongly enough how significant the Oral Law is. You can't live as a Jew without it.** The Written Law was written over a period of 40 years while the Jews wandered in the desert and God was dictating to Moses. There's a lot of material in the Bible that's explaining what happens later on in their wanderings, so obviously this wasn't given in advance at Mount Sinai or there'd be no free will.

Although the Torah -- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy -- are called the Five Books of Moses, Moses was not the author. Moses was the scribe -- the ultimate scribe. God dictated to Moses.

But it's very clear, and the Bible says over and over again, that Moses was unique among all prophets.

*And there arose no prophet in Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face.*(Deut. 34:10)

Prophecy means that a human being is able to transcend to a higher level of spiritual reality, and of course, what that level is depends on the prophet's direct experience of the infinite. Most prophets would get a vision and put that vision into words. Moses' prophecy was unique in that God spoke to him. He "heard" God directly.

And the Torah is considered a direct dictation, which is why the Five Book of Moses have a unique position among all holy books of the Jewish people and a unique authority in the Jewish world.

With the Ten Commandments in hand, Moses came down the mountain and what he saw shocked him to such an extent that he dropped the stone tablets. Below the mountain, where just a few weeks ago, they stood in an encounter with God, the Jews were worshipping an idol in direct violation of the law they had just been given.

FOR FURTHER READING SEE:

[DID GOD SPEAK AT MT. SINAI?"](#)



by Rabbi Ken Spiro

Only 1/10 of 1% of the Jews participated in worshipping the golden calf. Yet God's reaction makes it clear he is blaming the whole nation. What's going on here?

The day for this infamous event is forever marked in the Hebrew calendar -- 17th of Tammuz. This would be the day later in history on which the walls of Jerusalem would be breached by the Babylonians and the Romans prior to the destruction of both the first and the second Temple.

It is very important to analyze what happened with the golden calf and why the Torah criticizes the Jewish people so harshly for this sin. And indeed what is revealed here about how God views the Jewish people.

After the greatest national revelation experience in human history when the whole nation hears God, Moses goes up the mountain and comes down 40 days later to find a group dancing around an idol.

Now if I'd had an encounter with the Infinite Creator of the Universe speaking to me and I heard Him say "I am God, don't worship anything else," I don't think I would be stupid enough to be jumping around a golden cow. So what's going on in this story?

**Six weeks after an encounter with God who would be stupid enough to be jumping around a golden cow?**

This is a classic case of knowing how to correctly read the text of the Bible. When I say correctly read, I mean, ideally in Hebrew but certainly *with the commentators* because there's an oral explanation going along with the simple, very brief description in the text.

When Moses came down the mountain, were all 3 million Jews dancing around a golden calf? No. The Torah in Exodus 32:28 says it was only about 3 thousand people, mostly the mixed multitude of individuals who left with the Jews because they were so impressed by what went on with the Ten Plagues.

That means only .1% of the Jews participated and 99.9% of the Jews did nothing wrong. Yet God's reaction makes it clear he is blaming the whole nation.

### AN EXACTING STANDARD

God holds the Jews to a very high standard because they have a unique responsibility in human history. The world won't get perfected without the Jews and if, God forbid, the Jews blow it, all of humanity, not just the Jewish people, will be doomed. Therefore, the Bible uses hyper-critical language to bring home some important principles:

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1. According to your level of knowledge is your level of responsibility. The mistakes of people in positions of power have huge consequences.
2. According to your level of responsibility is your level of accountability. The greater you are, the bigger the impact of your decisions, therefore you must be held to an extremely high standard.

The Jewish people had been given the responsibility for the world at Mount Sinai, and these principles explain the criticism that God levels against Jews and why it is so super-strong.

We also learn here another fundamental idea of the Torah -- that every Jew is a guarantor for every other Jew. The nation of Israel is a "body" and the individual Jews are like cells in this body. If part of the body does something wrong, the whole body is held accountable.

**Judaism teaches you're either part of the problem or you're part of the solution.** Judaism teaches you're either part of the problem or you're part of the solution, and that you have a legal obligation to be part of the solution. Being a by-stander is not an option.

This issue repeats itself over and over again in the Bible and throughout Jewish history.

That's why when a small group of Jews does something wrong and the rest of the nation doesn't stop them, all are held accountable.

## THE AFTERMATH

Moses spends a lot of time back in the camp dealing with the aftermath of the golden calf debacle. He smashes the idol, gathers loyal Levites around him and executes those responsible. (As you might have noticed the Bible is not a liberal book. While it is full of the merciful acts of God, it also emphasizes that there are serious consequences for wrongdoing.)

He goes back up the mountain on the 1st of Elul -- *Rosh Chodesh Elul*. Elul is the month before Rosh Hashana, before 1st Tishrei, the beginning of the Jewish year. He spends forty days on the mountain again. He comes back down with the second set of tablets, and this is a clear sign that God has forgiven the Jewish people. What's the day Moses comes back down? Yom Kippur.

**All Jewish holidays are tied to specific historical events.** All Jewish holidays are tied to specific historical events. Each of these events implants within the holiday a certain spiritual power which can be accessed.

From Yom Kippur we get the spiritual power of *teshuvah* -- of repentance, of returning to closeness with God and repairing relationships with our fellow human beings.

As a sign of forgiveness God tells Moses He will dwell among the Jewish people, and He instructs how His "home" is to be built.

*"They shall make for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them."* (Exodus 25:8)

Following this command, the Torah spends many chapters giving intricate descriptions just exactly how to build this portable sanctuary.

The sanctuary consisted of a large tent -- called a "Tent of the Meeting" or Tabernacle -- surrounded by a courtyard. Inside the courtyard was an altar where sacrifices were offered. In the tent were two rooms. The outer room held a seven-branched candelabra, a table with twelve loaves of bread on it, and an incense altar. The inner -- called the Holy of Holies -- held the Ark of the Covenant.

## THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

Anyone who has seen *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* has seen a pretty good replica of what the Ark looked like. It was a wooden box covered with gold and it was decorated on top with two small statues of winged cherubs facing each other.

The commentators say that the two cherubs -- a boy and a girl -- normally faced each other but when the Jewish people were not getting along with God they would be turned away from each other.

Inside the Ark were the two sets of the Ten Commandments -- the broken set inscribed by God, and the second set inscribed by Moses.

The whole structure -- called the *Mishkan* in Hebrew -- was not a portable synagogue or a museum. It was a tool to be used by the Jewish people individually and as a nation, to connect to God.

When it was completed, the Torah relates that the "clouds of glory" -- a manifestation of God's infinite presence called the *Shechina* -- would literally rest on the sanctuary as a tangible sign that God was with the Jewish people.

**When the sanctuary stood, people would feel holiness in the world in a way we can't begin to understand today.**

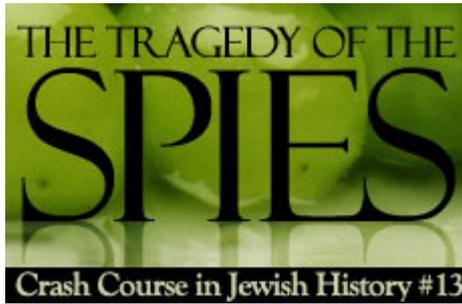
When the sanctuary stood, people would feel holiness in the world in a way we can't begin to understand today. Because we don't have it, only 369 of the 613 commandments are applicable and most of those are "don'ts." Most of "do's" are focused on how to use the *Mishkan* to connect to God. The loss of that structure has tremendous implications for the Jews' ability to relate to God and fulfill their mission as a people.

This sanctuary -- which was readily dis-assembled and assembled -- the Jews carried around in the wanderings in the desert for 40 years. Then, when they came into the land of Israel they assembled it in four different locations. After David became king and made Jerusalem his capital, he planned to build a permanent structure just outside the city, atop Mount Moriah where Abraham had offered Isaac as a sacrifice to God and where Jacob had dreamt of a ladder to heaven. But he never got to do it.

Finally, in 825 BCE, his son King Solomon built the first Temple there, and it became the permanent sanctuary until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 422 BCE. At this time the Ark of the Covenant disappeared never to be seen again. (We will discuss the speculations where it might be hidden when we reach that point in history.)

Seventy years after the first destruction and exile, the Jews returned and the Temple was rebuilt and then again destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, never to be rebuilt again. The golden Dome of the Rock, which is there now, was built on the site in the year 691 CE and it has stood there ever since.

But we are getting ahead of the story. At this juncture in time, the Jewish people have experienced a national revelation. They've been given the Torah, and built the sanctuary for God to dwell among them. Now they are ready to enter the Promised Land.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The spies story occurred on one of the most significant and tragic dates in Jewish history -- the 9th of Av. Every major disaster in Jewish history is connected to this date.**

After year at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people pack up their portable sanctuary and come to the borders of the Land of Israel.

They should have entered the land at this point, but somebody said, "Wait a minute, let's scout out the land."

So they select 12 "scouts" or "spies" -- one from each of the 12 tribes -- and send them in to do some reconnaissance work.

We have to spend a little time talking about the tragedy of the spies, because the implication of this event is going to reverberate throughout all of Jewish history. It's going to put into place one of the most significant and certainly most depressing dates in the Jewish calendar -- the Ninth of Av -- Tisha B'Av. Virtually every major disaster in Jewish history is going to be connected to the Ninth of Av -- which is the exact date when both the first and second Temples were destroyed.

**So what was the terrible mistake of the spies?**

Again, actions of the Jews have huge consequences. Jews have suffered throughout history because of that mistake they made "back then." So what was the terrible mistake of the spies?

These 12 spies spend 40 days scouting out the land and they come back with a huge cluster of grapes saying, "You all see the size of these grapes? You should see the size of the people who eat them. They are giants! No way we can beat them. We may as well go back to Egypt."

Only two of the spies dissent from this report: Joshua ben Nun, who is Moses' chief student, and Caleb ben Yefuna from the tribe of Judah.

But the Jewish people accept the majority report of the spies. The people break down in tears at the news and refuse to budge.

Moses is absolutely horrified and God is very angry. He issues two decrees of punishment:

1. God tells the Jews that because they displayed this lack of faith after He had brought them so far, they are doomed to wander in the desert for 40 years until the entire adult male population had died off. (The women, who always carried the standard of faith in Judaism, didn't listen to the spies and lived to go into the land.)
2. God tells the Jews that because they cried on this day for no good reason, they will cry on this day in history for some very good reasons. (We will see how this is carried out in future installments in this series.)

## DEATH OF MOSES

The Jews wander for 40 years.

Near the end of the 40 years of wandering, they find themselves -- as they did a number of times before -- without water. And as they did a number of times before, they are complaining. God tells Moses to speak to the rock and water will flow.

**For the past 40 years Moses has had the hardest job on the planet earth -- leading an unruly group of Jews.**

For the past 40 years Moses has had the hardest job on the planet earth -- leading an unruly group of people God himself described as "stiff-necked." We've talked about the Jewish people's greatest strength and greatest weakness. What's their greatest strength? Their complete dedication to an idea, which enabled them to outlast the greatest nations in history and die for an ideology that would change the world.

What's their greatest weakness? Their complete, stubborn dedication to an idea that makes every Jew think he's right and every Jew think that he's going to change the world his way. This is a group that is impossible to lead.

(A humorous story illustrating this point is told about a meeting between former US President Harry Truman and then Prime Minister of Israel Golda Meir. Truman was bemoaning the difficulties of leadership and remarked, "You have no idea what it is to be a president of a country of 250 million people." To which Meir responded, "You have no idea of what is to be a prime minister of a country of 2.5 million prime ministers.")

So after 40 years of trying to lead this unruly group, Moses loses his temper for one moment. "You rebels!" he shouts. And instead of speaking to the rock as he was commanded to do, he hits it.

And God says to Moses, "Because you don't believe in Me, you're not going to go into the Land of Israel with the Jewish people."

**Anger is a form of idolatry.**

The Sages say that anger is a form of idolatry, because if God runs the world, then everything that happens to you, whether for bad or for good, is the will of God. Losing your temper is a form of denial that God is running the world, a rejection of the idea that whatever happens is for your own good.

For Moses -- the ultimate prophet to whom God spoke face-to-face -- to get angry for a few seconds, the consequences are awesome. It's a desecration of God's name, done publicly in front of the Jewish people.

The consequences show just how accountable people on such high levels are for the little mistakes they make and the repercussions of those mistakes.

Moses, of course, sees his error right away and accepts God's judgment.

## THE FINALE

Moses now prepares the people for their entry into the Promised Land. The last of the Five Books of Moses is his farewell address to the people.

Note that the Five Books of Moses contain very little information about the wanderings of the Jews -- especially considering this period of time covered 40 years. After the tragedy of the spies, the Torah skips ahead 39 years, a time period which is only mentioned in hindsight in the Book of Deuteronomy as Moses reviews their mistakes.

When Deuteronomy begins, Moses already knows he's not destined to bring the Jewish people into the Land of Israel, and this entire book is his Moses' farewell address to the people. Here Moses reviews the commandments, and reiterates the Jewish national mission. The most common idea he repeats over and over again is: "Keep the Torah."

**The Book of Deuteronomy -- Moses' farewell address -- repeats over and over: "Keep the Torah."**

In a nutshell, Moses says, "If you keep the laws between 'man and God' and between 'man and man', everything will go fine for you. No other nation will touch you. You'll have material prosperity, and you will live to change the world. But if you don't keep the Torah, if you break your end of the bargain, then the land will vomit you out, your enemies will attack, and you will suffer."

The message is clear. The solution to all our problems has nothing to do with external threats. It always has to do with the Jews' relationship to each other and their relationship to God.

The 20th century was the first time in Jewish history where large numbers of Jews left God, and were left wondering, "Where is God?" World War One broke out on the Ninth of Av. The German sweep into Eastern Europe beginning in 1914, uprooted Jewish communities and demolished centuries of tradition. It was the precursor to the horrendous Holocaust.

**The Jews always said: "It's because of wrongdoing that God has done this to us."**

A Holocaust survivor writes: "The quintessential element that distinguishes this event (the Holocaust) was the search for God. Every Jew who remained in the ghettos and the camps remembers "the God Syndrome" that shrouded everything else. From morning till night we cried out for a sign that God was still with us... We sought Him, but we did not find Him. We were always accompanied by the crushing and unsettling feeling that God had disappeared from our midst."

(Machshavot Magazine, Vol. 46, p. 4)

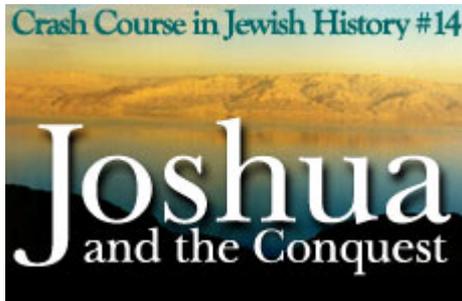
Throughout the rest of Jewish history, Jews in even the worst circumstances have viewed external problems, even the worst problems like being slaughtered en masse in the Crusades, as divine retribution

for their mistakes. You will never find Jews, until this century, saying "Where is God?" They are always saying, "It's because of wrongdoing that God has done this to us."

Having delivered this final message, Moses dies and is buried on Mount Nebo somewhere across the mountains in Jordan. We are deliberately not told where it is, so nobody will worship his grave over there.

Joshua assumes leadership. Judaism is a meritocracy. Real leadership in Jewish history goes to the people, not those who were born into the right families, but to the people who are best suited for the job. So the job of successor does not go to Moses' sons (who are barely heard of) but to Joshua ben Nun, Moses' chief disciple who had proven his mettle in the incident with the spies.

The Bible continues with the Book of Joshua.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**This is no typical war of conquest replete with pillaging and murder. God has said, "If you follow My instructions all will go well."**

The Book of Joshua begins:

*And it was after the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, that the Lord said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying, "Moses my servant has died and now arise and cross the River Jordan. You and all this nation go to the land which I give the Children of Israel. Every place on which the soles of your feet will tread I have given to you, as I have spoken to Moses. No man shall stand up before you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so shall I be with you. I will not weaken my grasp on you nor will I abandon you. Just be strong and very courageous to observe and do in accordance with all the Torah that Moses my servant has commanded you. Therefore, do not stray right or left in order that you will succeed in wherever you go."*

The Book of Joshua describes the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel during a very significant period of Jewish history.

**There is no single power ruling the land, rather it is dotted with many fortified city-states.**

At this time the so-called Promised Land is bounded by the Egyptian empire to the south and the Assyrian empire to the north. But it is not ruled by either of them. In fact, there is no one power ruling this section of land, rather it is settled by seven Canaanite tribes who inhabit 31 fortified city-states scattered all over the map, each ruled by its own "king."

(Jericho is one of these city-states, so is Ai, so is Jerusalem, where Canaanite tribesmen called Jebusites dwell.)

Before they enter the land, the Jewish people send an envoy to the Canaanites with the message, "God, the Creator of the Universe has promised this land to our forefathers. We are now here to claim our inheritance, and we ask you to leave peacefully."

Needless to say most of the Canaanites don't. (Only one tribe does the right thing and gets out.)

Meanwhile, Joshua has clear instructions from God that if the Canaanites don't get out, the Jews must wipe them out, because if they remain in the land they are going to corrupt the Jews. It is made clear that the Canaanites are extremely immoral and idolatrous people and the Jews cannot live with them as neighbors.

This is like saying today that living in a bad neighborhood messes up your kids. You have to always be careful about outside influences.

So what happens?

## THE BATTLE OF JERICHO

The people go into the land and they fight a series of battles. The first is the battle of Jericho, the entrance to the heartland of Canaan.

Some archeologists have suggested that the easy conquest of this heavily-fortified city was made possible by a well-timed earthquake. But isn't it remarkable that precisely when the Jewish people need the city to fall, there is an earthquake and it does? Of course, they call it a miracle.

**The waters of the Jordan part and they cross on dry land, then the Jordan refills with water.**

The waters of the Jordan part and they cross on dry land, then the Jordan refills with water. Next they march around the city walls, which crumble before their eyes. They conquer the city, taking no booty as commanded by God.

Hard to believe?

Writes archeologist-physicist Charles Pellegrino in *Return to Sodom and Gomorrah*:

... we are told (in Joshua 4:18) that the waters of the Jordan quickly returned to their normal level. This is consistent with the recent history of the Jordan's natural dams. Within forty-eight hours (and typically within as few as sixteen hours), the waters piling up behind an earthquake-made barrier overflow the mount, tearing great holes in it as they spill forth. (p. 267)

Pellegrino details (pp. 257-268) the excavation of what is believed to be the ancient city of Jericho. He notes many findings that support the story as it is told in the Book of Joshua, including the fact that the storehouses of grain -- a very valuable booty -- had been found intact.

It must be clear by now that this is not the typical war of conquest such as we read about in human history of bloody warfare, of raping and pillaging. God has said, "Nothing like that here. And if you follow My instructions all will go well."

## ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE

The Jews move on to the next city-state, a place called Ai.

But here things don't go so smoothly. In fact, they meet with a terrible defeat with many of their number killed. Traumatized by the experience, they plead to know why God had abandoned them and quickly learn the terrible truth -- that one person, Achan, had stolen some items back in Jericho.

One person out of 3 million didn't listen to God and everyone suffers!

**One person out of  
3 million didn't  
listen to God and  
everyone suffers!**

The fascinating thing here is that the Bible seems to be saying that obedience to God's commands is paramount and that as far as the Jews are concerned -- it is all for one and one for all.

As an outgrowth of that lesson, Judaism teaches that there is such a thing as collective responsibility as well as individual responsibility -- no person is an island, each exists as part of the whole and is responsible for the actions of others as well as his or her own.

In today's world, the motto seems to be "Mind your own business." If we operated on the same level as they did back then, half the world's problems would disappear.

## **LIFE IN THE LAND**

Despite many difficulties on the way, the Israelites do finally lay claim to the Promised Land but their life there is far from calm, particularly after Joshua dies. The Bible relates that they had only themselves to blame:

*And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord ... and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers ... and he gave them over into the hands of their enemies." (Judges 2:8-14)*

From a simple reading of the text, one might assume that the entire Jewish people abandoned the Torah and started worshipping idols. But this, in fact, was not true. As with the incident of the golden calf (see Part 12) only a small percentage of the people sinned, yet the entire nation is held accountable.

The highly self-critical nature of this passage is typical of others which make the Hebrew Bible a unique document -- a holy book of a people, but also relating the sinful history of this people. It has been said that if the Hebrew Bible was not written by the Jews, it must have been written by anti-Semites. As Gabriel Sivan observes in *The Bible and Civilization*:

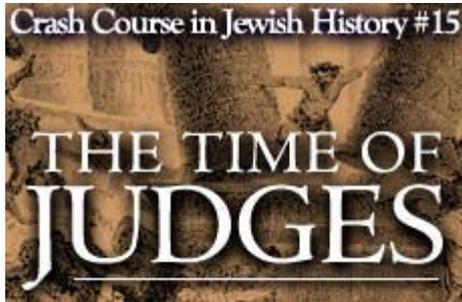
Biblical heroes and heroines ... are depicted as they are, with their virtues and their human failings ... This ethically uncompromising aspect of the scriptural narrative particularly impressed the Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill: "The Bible is an anti-Semitic book. Israel is the villain not the hero in his own story." Alone among epics, it is out for truth, not high heroics. (p. 10)

There is no question that the criticism of the Jews in the Bible is hyper-criticism, but there are two reasons why the slightest offense by a small group of people is condemned so strongly:

1. As noted above, every Jew is responsible for every other Jew, and what one does reflects on all.
2. It's such an obvious point in the moral history of the world that as soon as you tolerate something, it becomes bearable, and before long it will become common.

Therefore, here God is driving home an important point to the Jews: You're on a very high spiritual level. If you tolerate even small indiscretions by a few, eventually these few are going to pollute the nation.

Indeed, this is eventually what does happen, but before it does the Jews enjoy a honeymoon period in the land known as the Time of Judges.



**The Jews had no king, but when they needed guidance they turned to "judges," who were both warriors and prophets**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The Talmud calls the Book of Judges, "the Book of the Straight."

Why?

Because the ultimate goal of every Jew is to use his free will to work out what is wrong and right, using the Torah as a guide. And this is what happens in the Time of Judges.

*In those days, there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his eyes. (Judges 21:25)*

Some say this verse sounds like a description of anarchy. But there was no anarchy; the vast majority of Jews were totally dedicated to Torah and were making decisions in the right way, and didn't need someone tell them what to do. Indeed, that is the ideal situation.

Of course, the lack of leadership following the death of Joshua did have negative consequence; a small minority took it as a license to slip into idolatry and immorality. This happened largely because the Jews did not get rid of all of the Canaanites, as they were commanded to do, and the Canaanite pagan influence was felt.

Whenever the Jews abandon God, the repercussions are immediate:

*And they forsook the God of their fathers and they went after other gods. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and He delivered them into the hands of spoilers and he gave them over to the hands of their enemies. (Judges 2:8-14)*

This is one of the most important patterns we have to understand in how Jewish history works. When the Jews betray their covenant with God, bad things happen -- usually, an enemy comes and attacks.

**When we betray  
our covenant with  
God and bad**

**things happen -- an enemy comes and attacks us.** The covenant with God doesn't just cover the behavior of man toward God, it also includes the commandments mandating the behavior of man toward man. But both are a must.

## HEED THE WARNING

God says over and over again -- keep the Torah, *all* facets of it and no one will bother you. You will live in peace in your land. You will prosper, and not only that, the whole world will come to learn from you and you will elevate the entire planet.

But if you don't, a big fist will *not* come out of heaven and swat you, because God acts in history. What will happen instead is a physical enemy will appear or a famine will hit the land, and all will suffer.

When bad things happen to Jews, it is never by chance. It is always a consequence of Jewish actions, and therefore, the remedy is never to deal solely with the external threat. If an enemy attacks, defense is in order, but so is introspection; the presence of enemy is only a symptom of a deeper problem that must be dealt with.

We see this in the Time of Judges which extends from 1244 BCE to 879 BCE.

*And the Lord raised up judges and they saved them [the Israelites] from the hands of those who had spoiled them. (Judges 2:16)*

Who are the Judges?

The Judges are Jewish leaders who arise during this time, unify the people, get them to repent, deal with the spiritual problems of the nation, and also deal with the physical threat.

**The Judges were individuals who unified the people and dealt with their spiritual and physical problems.**

They are military leaders who know how to mobilize the nation for war against an enemy, but their real power lies in their Torah knowledge and ability to adjudicate Jewish law.

We will highlight a few of the 16 Judges described in the Bible:

### DEBORAH

One of the first of the Judges is a woman -- Deborah. (See Judges, chapter 4-5.) She is famous for sitting under a palm tree where anyone could seek her advice, and from where she issued battle orders.

Barak, Israel's top warrior during that time, refuses to go into battle without her. Together they lead the troops against the much larger Canaanite force backed up by 900 iron chariots, of which Israel had none.

The Book of Judges describes a key battle with the Canaanites led by Sisera.

On the even of the battle, Barak is doubtful that Israel's warriors could ever beat such a strong opponent but Deborah stands firm. An unexpected storm is unleashed in the heavens, and the resulting downpour turns the ground to mud; the iron chariots get stuck and the Canaanites panic.

Deborah's prophecy that "This is the day on which the Lord will deliver [the Canaanite general] Sisera into your hands..." is thus fulfilled.

## **SAMSON**

Samson is the Judge famous for his superhero strength, and for leading the struggle against Israel's arch-enemy, the Philistines. (See Judges, chapters 13-16.)

The Philistines were a seafaring people who inhabited the coast of Israel and Lebanon in the area of Gaza-Ashdod-Jaffa. They had migrated into the area from somewhere in the Mediterranean and settled there in the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age.

Excavations show that the Philistines -- despite what the word "Philistine" has come down to mean in the English language -- were very sophisticated culturally. They had perfected iron tools and iron weapons, gaining an important technological advantage over their neighbors.

**The Philistines had perfected iron tools and iron weapons, which gave them the technological edge.**

With their might, they started encroaching on the Jewish people who are living in the highlands during this time.

Samson was one of the people who takes on the Philistines. He is a most unusual man who never cuts his hair and he has superhuman strength because of this.

To undermine the Philistines he pretends to join them by deliberately marrying a Philistine woman but she is killed by her own people; he then consorts with another Philistine woman -- Delilah. A big mistake.

Delilah catches on that Samson is a major threat to her people. She figures out the secret of his superhuman strength and cuts off his hair while he is asleep. As a result the Philistines are able to capture him. They then blind him and throw him in prison.

But they forget that hair grows. As his hair grew back, his superhuman strength returns.

Unaware of this, the Philistines decides to execute Samson in a public display at the Temple of Dagan, one of their gods.

As the masses gather to watch the execution, blind Samson asks a slave boy to position him next to one of the columns supporting the temple. With his renewed superhuman strength he overturns the column and collapses the whole place killing all inside.

He dies giving his life for the Jewish people and the Bible says he killed more Philistine enemies in that moment than he vanquished the whole rest of his life.

## **SAMUEL**

The last of the Judges is the Prophet Samuel, who is one of the most important prophets in Jewish history, and who is also famous for anointing the first two kings of Israel -- Saul and David. (See 1 Samuel, chapters 1-16.)

**In the final analysis, the nation couldn't maintain this level of scrutiny without stronger guidance.**

By the time Samuel appears on the scene, the Jewish people have gone through close to 400 years of no strong central leadership. They had to live up to a very high level of individual responsibility or else God would let them know they were off course via the Canaanites or the Philistines or the Midianites. This was a very hard way to live. In the final analysis, the nation couldn't maintain this level of scrutiny without stronger guidance.

When Samuel was younger, he would travel the land adjudicating Jewish law and giving people advice, but now that he has grown old, he can't do it anymore. Meanwhile, his two sons, who have taken over for him, prove unpopular with the people.

So a delegation is dispatched to ask Samuel to anoint a king instead:

*And they the people said [to Samuel] "Behold, you have grown old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now set up for us a king to judge us like all the nations. And the thing was displeasing in the eyes of Samuel ..." (1 Samuel, 8:5-7)*

Samuel doesn't want to do it, but God tells him to go ahead and find a king for the people.

And this is how the Time of Judges comes to a close. Samuel functions as a Judge for 13 years and the last of two years he actually co-leads the Jewish people with the first Jewish king whose name is Saul.



**King Saul was a great man who committed one terrible mistake, dooming his reign from the start.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In his farewell address to his people, Moses warns:

*"When you come into the land which the Lord your God is giving you and inherit it and live in it, and you say, 'Let us appoint over me a king like all the nation around me,' [then] you will appoint over yourself a king whom the Lord your God shall choose. From among your brothers are you to appoint over yourself a king, you may not appoint over yourself a foreigner who is not your brother. However, he must not acquire too many horses for himself ... And he is not to acquire too many wives ... neither shall he acquire too much silver and gold. And it shall be that when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom that he shall write for himself a copy of the Torah..." (Deut. 17:14-19)*

This time has come to pass now.

The Jewish people have been living for close to four centuries without strong central leadership and they miss it. So they ask the prophet Samuel to appoint a king.

## LIKE ALL THE REST

Samuel is not happy over this request but God tells him to go ahead. Still it is clear that God is not happy with it either:

*"Listen to the voice of the people according to all that they say to you for they have not rejected you but they have rejected Me from reigning over them."* (1 Samuel 8:7)

Why are Samuel and God displeased, especially since Moses had predicted this turn of events and there is even a Torah commandment to do so?

The answer lies in the way the people asked for a king:

*And they the people said [to Samuel] "... Now set up for us a king to judge us like all the nations ..."* (1 Samuel, 8:6)

A Jewish king was not supposed to be a king "like all the nations" had. A Jewish king was supposed to be a model of what an ideal Jew is all about -- a figurehead for the rest of the nation to emulate.

**A Jewish king was supposed to be a model of an ideal Jew.**

To ask for a king "like all the nations" suggests that the Jews wanted a big strong guy so that they could sit back and throw off that heavy burden of responsibility that they've had to deal with on a day-to-day basis. It's much easier in many respects to have someone decide for you, which is why the Talmud says that "a slave is happier being a slave" -- a slave who is well treated will give up his freedom to know that he is being taken care of and decisions are being made for him.

In the year 879 Saul is anointed as king by the prophet Samuel in accordance with the wishes of the people. He rules until 877 BCE.

## THE CHOICE

How was Saul chosen king?

The story of Saul's anointing tells us much about the functioning of Jewish society in this time period.

For one thing, there are many prophets around. So many in fact -- the Talmud says that from the time of Moses to the destruction of the First Temple there were over a million prophets -- that the people turn to them for everything. You have a profound question about Jewish law? Ask a prophet. You need advice on marriage? Ask a prophet. You've lost your donkey? Ask a prophet.

Indeed this is how Saul and the Prophet Samuel meet. Saul comes to Samuel for help in locating some lost donkeys.

It's an odd story. A man goes to the greatest prophet alive and asks, "Where's my donkey?" The prophet answers, "Oh, your donkey is behind the shed, and by the way, you're king of Israel."

When Samuel tells him that he will be king, Saul hides. This is where we first see the weakness of his character.

## A FATAL WEAKNESS

The Talmud is very clear that Saul is not only head and shoulders above everyone physically, he's head and shoulders above everyone morally and ethically. He's an exemplary human being, but he has one weakness -- he suffers from misplaced modesty. A really humble person recognizes his or her true strengths and weaknesses; he also knows the difference between honor due him and the honor due his position.

But Saul is not really strong enough to be a leader of the Jewish people. To lead the Jewish people requires a unique combination of iron will and diplomacy -- as we saw in the difficulties Moses faced leading the Israelites in the wilderness (Part 13). If the leader is not strong enough the Jewish people will walk all over him, but if he's too strong they'll rebel. The problem of weak leadership -- which begins with Saul -- is something that will plague the Jewish people throughout history as will become glaringly apparent.

Saul reigns from 879 to 877 BCE. He's king for only two years and he dies a tragic death. Indeed, his brief reign in itself is tragic, and it has to do with a fatal mistake he makes early on. He disobeys the commandment of God to wipe out the nation of Amalek.

**The Jewish people are commanded to "to wipe out Amalek."** One of the key commandments that the Jewish people are given upon entering the Land of Israel is "to wipe out Amalek." Amalek is the ultimate enemy of the Jewish people in history. This is the people that symbolize evil, and there is a commandment in the Bible to wipe them off the face of the earth, because their pathological hatred for Jews is so great, if they have a chance they will wipe the Jews off the face of the earth.

Amalek's major ambition is to rid the world of the Jews and their moral influence and return the planet to idolatry, paganism, and barbarism.

Since this is a cosmic war between good and evil which cannot be settled with treaties, God commands the Jews to destroy Amalek -- the entire nation, down to the last cow.

Saul has the opportunity to do so. He wages war against Amalek as commanded and wins, but when it comes to fulfilling the decree he falters. The cows are spared, and Agag, the king of the Amalekites, is spared also.

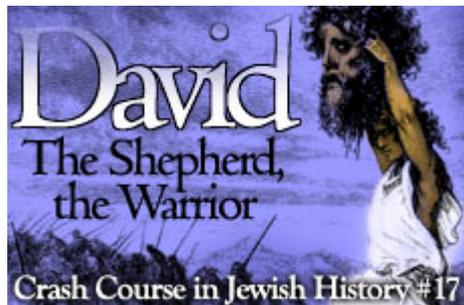
## IDEOLOGY OF AMALEK

To this day, history continues to struggle with the consequences of Saul's mistake.

Agag fathers a child before he is killed by the Prophet Samuel, and then the nation of Amalek goes underground.

Today, we have no way of identifying the descendants of Amalek, but we do know that the Amalekite ideology lives on. There has been more than one occasion when people have arisen bent on exterminating the Jews.

One such example was Haman, the Persian minister who tried to annihilate the Jews in the time of Queen Esther (355 BCE). And Hitler certainly espoused Amalekite ideology:



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**Still too young to fight in the army, David becomes Israel's champion when he slays Goliath.**

Yes, we are barbarians! We want to be barbarians. It is an honorable title to us ... Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I free man from ... the degrading self-mortification of a false vision called

conscience and morality ... Conscience is a Jewish invention. (*Hitler Speaks*, pp. 87, 220-222.)

And looking at Hitler and the Holocaust we can understand that such intense hatred as the Bible ascribes to Amalek can exist in the world. The Nazis wanted to kill every Jew. A Jew could have been assimilated, intermarried with Christians for three generations but that didn't matter; the Nazis were bent on killing anyone with the slightest bit of Jewish heritage -- they were bent on wiping out any trace of the Jewish people and Jewish influence.

## THE END OF SAUL

Meanwhile, the Prophet Samuel tells Saul:

*"I shall not return to you for you have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you from being King over Israel."*

*And Samuel turned to go and he [Saul] seized the hem of his robe and it tore. And Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it your fellow who is better than you." (1 Samuel 15:26-28)*

With this critical mistake, Saul is finished. He doesn't get a second chance. God doesn't mess around when it comes to the King of Israel.

If this seems harsh, we must keep in mind the guiding principles of the relationship between God and the Jewish people.

1. According to your level of knowledge is your level of responsibility. The mistakes of people in positions of power have huge consequences.
2. According to your level of responsibility is your level of accountability. The greater you are, the bigger the impact of your decisions, therefore you must be held to an extremely high standard.

Therefore even the smallest mistakes of Jewish leaders are severely punished.

Although Saul is finished, this doesn't mean he gets deposed on the spot, but it means that his line will not carry on the monarchy.

Indeed, following this declaration to Saul, Samuel goes looking for another king to anoint and he finds him in the most unlikely place.

After Prophet Samuel realizes that Saul is too weak to be King of Israel, he goes looking for another candidate.

Guided by God, Samuel finds himself in the town of Bet Lechem (today's Bethlehem), paying a call on a man named Jesse among whose sons the next king is to be found.

Jesse presents seven of his sons, and Samuel sees that all are amazing men -- physically-fit, well-educated in Jewish law, dedicated to God. But not good enough. The Bible relates that as Samuel is admiring one of Jesse's sons, he gets a message from God:

*God said to Samuel, "Do not look at his countenance and at his tall stature, for I have rejected him. For it is not as man perceives it; a man sees what is visible to the eyes but God sees into the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)*

So Samuel asks: "Don't you have any more sons?" Jesse, a little flustered, responds: "Well, there still the little one, but he is out tending sheep."

The little one is David. Samuel demands that Jesse go get him and as soon as little red-headed David appears, Samuel knows he is the one. Despite the fact that physically he's not so impressive, he has what it takes to be the strong leader Israel needs.

This teaches us a very important lesson on how we're supposed to judge people. We live in a superficial world. We are judged by how we look, which is why plastic surgery and looking eternally young is such a big thing. Judaism says true greatness of the individual is not measured by outward appearance; true greatness resides in the soul.

## **THE ANOINTED**

Samuel takes a flask of oil and pours it on David's head. This is called "anointing" -- in Hebrew *moshach*, which is where the word *Moshiach* or Messiah comes from.

When Samuel anoints David, this does not mean David becomes king. It just means he has been designated by God as next in line.

**reign, but his days are numbered.** Meanwhile, Saul continues to reign not knowing what has happened, although previously he has been told by Samuel that his days are numbered.

The Bible relates that the moment that David was anointed, "the spirit of God left Saul" and he fell into a black depression. To help relieve his angst, his advisors decide to bring in a harp player, reasoning that listening to music will make the king feel better.

And this is how David, still the shepherd, is brought to the palace -- he plays the harp beautifully and his playing relieves King Saul who doesn't know that this youth will soon replace him.

## DAVID AND GOLIATH

During this time Israel is constantly at war with the Philistines (whom we introduced in Part 15 of this series.)

We know that ancient warfare was highly ritualized. In Homer's *Iliad*, we read how battles were conducted in ancient times in the epic story of the siege of Troy, (circa 1200 BCE). We see that each side would send out its great champion who would fight on behalf of his people. Often the battle would end with that, because whichever champion won the other side would be so demoralized it would retreat.

This is the same situation at this time in Jewish history -- the Philistines have a champion who is a pretty awesome guy. His name is Goliath and he's huge.

(There used to be in world of wrestling a guy by the name of Andre the Giant. I remember seeing this guy. He was 7-foot-5" and weighed 450 lbs. He used to wrestle three guys at once. Goliath was even bigger.)

The problem is that the Jewish forces have no champion at all.

**Goliath is marching out in front of the Philistine lines, shouting curses at the Jews.** The Jewish troops are stationed on the one side of the Elah Valley just south of Jerusalem -- a place which you can still visit today in Israel -- and the Philistines are on the other. Goliath is marching out in front of the Philistine lines, shouting curses at the Jews. And the mortified Israelite army has to listen to this, because no one is willing to take on Goliath.

One day, David -- who is still too young to serve in the army -- shows up on the battlefield bringing food for his brothers and he's shocked by what he sees.

## FAITH IN GOD

Outraged that no one has the guts to fight Goliath, he volunteers for the job, though he has a hard time convincing everybody to let him go out into the field. Finally, he convinces King Saul with his steadfast faith in God:

*And David said, "God who saved me from the claws of the lion and the claws of the bear, He will save me from the hands of the Philistine." (1 Samuel 17:37)*

To that Saul answers:

*"Go and may God be with you."*

David goes out to meet Goliath without sword or armor, only with his slingshot and a few stones, and his deep abiding faith in God.

Seeing him Goliath laughs:

*"Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?"*

But David is undisturbed:

*"You come towards me with a sword, a spear and a javelin, but I come to you with the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the battalions of Israel whom you have insulted. This day God shall deliver you into my hand ... and this entire gathering shall know that it is not by a sword or with a spear that God saves..."* (1 Samuel 17:47)

As Goliath advances toward him, David uses his sling to hurl a rock at the giant's face. It hits him in the forehead and he falls to the ground, flat on his face. David then removes Goliath's sword and cuts off his head.

The stunned Philistines start running, pursued by the Israelite army. The end result is a tremendous victory for the Jews.

## **NOT BY MIGHT**

The words that David speaks on the battlefield are very powerful. He emphasizes that the true strength of the Jewish people is God, echoing the famous words of the Prophet Zechariah:

*"Not by strength, not by might, but with My spirit," says the Lord of Hosts.*" (Zechariah 4:6)

Jews have to remember that they will win if God is with them, but as soon as they lose sight of that, they are in trouble. We'll see this when we get to modern Israeli history -- the great victory in 1967 and the terrible losses of 1973.

Jews must always remember where the source of their strength comes from.

David is one Jewish leader who is not likely to forget that, even though overnight he becomes a super hero. He marries the king's daughter, Michal. And even a song is composed about him and it becomes very popular: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

**The adoration of David makes Saul insanely jealous.** The adoration of David makes Saul insanely jealous. He tries to kill him, but, warned by Michal, David manages to flee. Saul hunts him all over the country, and David has to go into hiding.

But Saul has not much left to his reign; he is about to be killed in battle.

## **SAUL'S FINAL BATTLE**

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The Philistines attack again -- at Mount Gilboa, up north near the Galilee.

It's amazing how far the Philistines manage to encroach into the country. They are no longer just on the coast, they have actually reached the area of the major trade route in the ancient Near East -- the King's Highway -- which led through Mount Gilboa, up to Beit She'an and then up to Damascus. Strategically they're in a bad place for the Jewish people. Saul marches out with his army to go fight the Philistines.

Saul always knew the outcome of each battle by consulting with the prophet Samuel. But now the prophet is dead. He manages to contact him in the other world however, and Samuel tells him that he stands no chance, because God is no longer with him.

Nevertheless, Saul is no coward and he leads the Jewish people into battle despite the odds. His sons are killed before his eyes and defeat appears certain. Lest he, himself, be captured by the enemy, the wounded Saul falls on his sword and dies.

The Philistines take Saul's body and remove his head, which they send on tour around the country. They hang his body and the bodies of his three sons on the walls of the city of Beit She'an, but the Jews come back at night, steal the headless body and bury it.

Meanwhile, David reappears down in the south in Hebron, where he is crowned king and it is the story of his reign that we shall take up next.



**He established Jerusalem  
as Israel's capital,  
choosing a place that  
Jacob called "the gate of  
heaven**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

King David is one of the most important figures in Jewish history. Born in 907 BCE, he reigns as king of Israel for 40 years, dying at age 70 in 837 BCE.

There is so much that can be said about him. Some people like to focus on the warrior aspect -- the chivalrous warrior fighting for God -- but when his persona and accomplishments are considered as a whole, it is his spiritual greatness that shines most of all.

David is a real man -- with real human faults -- whose first and foremost drive is to have a relationship with God. We get the glimpse of the beauty of his soul when we read the Psalms, most of which he wrote. Who doesn't know:

*The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want ... (Psalm 23)*

*The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear ... (Psalm 27)*

*I lift my eyes to the mountains -- from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth ... (Psalm 121)*

Even when we consider his military conquest, we see that the driving force behind them was his attachment to God.

## THE CONQUEST OF JERUSALEM

We know historically that the story of Israel during this entire period of time -- from the Exodus onward -- is the story of a tiny nation sandwiched between the two great ancient civilizations, Egypt and Mesopotamia (which was ruled at various times by the Assyrians, Babylonians or Persians).

When David takes the throne, Egypt and Assyria are both on a significant decline. They're not in any position to expand, which leaves a vacuum in the middle where Israel is located, and Israel is allowed to expand unmolested by these other great empires.

Thus David is able to subdue, at long last, the Philistine threat and to conquer the remaining Canaanite city-state -- Jerusalem -- that the Israelites have thus far not been able to conquer. (For background, see Part 14: Joshua and the Conquest of the Promised Land.)

**For the 450 years since the Jewish people first entered the Land, Jerusalem has remained unconquerable.**

For the 450 years since the Jewish people first entered the Land of Israel until the time of King David, Jerusalem has remained unconquerable. It is a city-state inhabited by Canaanite tribe called Jebusites (the Arab village of Silwan is located there now). It is heavily fortified, yet despite its seemingly impregnable appearance, Jerusalem has one weakness -- its only source of water is a spring outside the city walls. The spring is accessed from inside the city by a long shaft carved into rock.

The Book of Samuel and the Book of Chronicles describe how David's general, Yoab, climbs up a *tzinor* (literally "pipe") enters the city and conquers it. Some archaeologists speculate that this might refer to "Warren Shaft" -- a vertical tunnel running up from Gihon Spring -- which is a tourist attraction in "David's City," outside the walls of today's Jerusalem.

## WHY JERUSALEM?

The first thing that David does after he occupies the city is make it his capital. And here we have to pause and ask: Why Jerusalem?

Certainly there were more suitable sites for the capital of Israel. Jerusalem does not adjoin any important body of water nor is it located on any trade route. All the capital cities in the world are built near oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, or at least near a major trade route.

(There are major trade routes crisscrossing Israel at this time. There is the Kings Highway, which is one of the major trade routes in the ancient Middle East, running from the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea to Damascus. And there is also the Via Maris, "Way of the Sea," which runs from Egypt along the Mediterranean coast then through Israel and on to Syria.)

**The capital of Israel should**

**have been on the Mediterranean Sea.** The capital of Israel should have been on the Mediterranean Sea. Ideally a place like Jaffa (next to today's Tel Aviv) would have made the most sense.

So why Jerusalem?

The reason why Jerusalem has to do with a very unique aspect of the Jewish people, and why the children of Israel became a nation in the first place.

Normally, nations become nations by living in a piece of real estate for a long period of time, developing a common language and a common culture. Take the French for example. They didn't all wake up one day and decide they liked white wine, cheese and croissants. A group of people over a period of time moved into a common piece of real estate (which later became known as France), and shared a common language. After a shared period of national experience, they coalesced into an identity known as the French. More or less, this scenario works for every nation.

The Jews became a nation shortly after escaping slavery in Egypt. They were not yet in the land of Israel, they were camping out in no man's land, in the desert, at the foot of Mount Sinai. The Jews became a nation there, when they made a covenant with God, promising "we will do and we will hear." The nationhood of Israel is defined, first and foremost, by its communal relationship with God.

And it turns out that there is no better place to relate to God than Jerusalem.

## **GOD'S PLACE**

As soon as David makes Jerusalem his capital, he buys a small hill on the northern boundary of the city from its owner Aravnah, the Jebusite. The purchase is recorded in the Bible in two places (2 Samuel 24:24 and 1 Chronicles 21:25).

This hill is Mount Moriah.

This is where Abraham went up to offer Isaac as a sacrifice and later remarked as the Bible records:

*"The Lord will see," as it is said to this day, "On the Lord's mountain, He will be seen." (Genesis 22:14)*

This is where Jacob dreamt of a ladder going to heaven, and said:

*"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:17)*

No wonder this is a spot that every major conqueror in all of human history has wanted to own. (Jerusalem has been conquered or destroyed 36 times in 3,000 years.)

**This is the place  
where God's  
presence can be  
felt more  
intensively than**

**in any other place on earth.** Today on this spot stands an Islamic structure known as the Dome of the Rock. Under this golden dome is a rock which is metaphysically known as the *even shtiah*, literally, "drinking stone." Drinking water and spirituality are synonymous, and the Torah is known as *mayim chayim*, "water of life." According to Judaism, the world is spiritually nourished from this spot, this stone.

This is the place where God's presence can be felt more intensively than in any other place on the planet earth. Therefore, this is the logical place to build a permanent resting spot for the most holy object that the Jewish people have -- the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant.

## THE SITE OF THE TEMPLE

King David wastes no time bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. And it is an occasion of great communal happiness. In ecstasy David dances wildly at this celebration. For this he is condemned by his wife Michal, the daughter of Saul, who had stuck with him through thick and thin and who even saved his life when King Saul wanted to kill him. But now Michal attacks David, ridiculing his behavior (2 Samuel 6:16-23):

*"How glorious was the king of Israel today, who was exposed today in the eyes of the maidservants of his servants, as one of the boors would be exposed!"*

David -- who had thought nothing of his own honor in his gladness that he had made a special connection with God, -- responds in astonishment:

*"Before the Lord I will make merry. And I shall behave even more humbly than this, and I shall be lowly in my eyes; and of the maidservants of whom you have spoken, by them shall I will be held in honor."*

The story concludes with the punishment visited on Michal for her harsh condemnation of the man chosen by God to be Israel's king:

*And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.*

Although David brings up the Ark of the Covenant to Mount Moriah, he is not allowed by God to build the Temple. A number of reasons are given. One is that the Temple is a house of God and a house of peace and David has a lot of blood on his hands from subduing the enemies of Israel. However, he is promised that his son will build it.

Now David has a number of sons by several wives, some of whom give him serious trouble. One, Amnon, rapes his sister, Tamar. Another, Absalom plots against David and tries to have him deposed. But there is one special boy, Solomon, born from David's relationship with the beautiful Bathsheba.

## DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

The story of David's relationship with Bathsheba is one of the most misread stories in the Bible, and we have to be careful in reading it as a soap opera. In summary, however, this is what happens.

Restless one night, David is pacing the roof of his palace from where he has a view of the homes and gardens in the city below. And there he spies a beautiful woman bathing. She is the wife of one of his generals, Uriah, the Hittite, who is away at war.

David sends for Bathsheba and spends the night with her. When she becomes pregnant, he commands that Uriah be placed on the front lines, where he dies in battle. David then marries Bathsheba.

**Furious at what he hears, King David, declares, "As God lives, the one who has done this deserves death."**

At this point, the prophet Nathan pays a call on the king. (See 2 Samuel 12.) He says that he has come to inform the king of a great injustice in the land. A rich man with many sheep, stole the one beloved sheep of a poor man, and had it slaughtered for a feast.

Furious at what he hears, King David, declares, "As God lives, the one who has done this deserves death."

Responds the prophet, "You are that man!"

David is humbled. "I have sinned before God," he says.

This is an enormously complex story and there is much more here than meets the eye. Technically, Bathsheba was not a married woman since David's troops always gave their wives conditional divorces, lest a soldier be missing in action leaving his wife unable to remarry. However, the Bible states clearly that David acted improperly, and the Sages explain that while David did not commit adultery in the literal sense, he was clearly morally wrong.

As noted in earlier installments, the Bible takes a hyper-critical position of Jewish leaders. It never whitewashes anyone's past, and in that it stands alone among the records of ancient peoples which usually describe kings as descendants of gods without faults.

David's greatness shines in the humility of his admission and the repentance that follows. This is part of the reason that the ultimate redeemer of the Jewish people and the world will descend from David's line -- he will be "Messiah ben David."

Shortly thereafter, Bathsheba gives birth, but the child becomes deathly ill as the prophet Nathan had predicted. David goes into a period of prayer and fasting, but the child dies nevertheless. David realizes that this happened in atonement for his actions. He also knows that God has forgiven him.

Before long Bathsheba is pregnant again. And this time, she bears a healthy child -- who is named Solomon, and who will be the golden child, gifted with unusual wisdom.



**King Solomon, the wisest of all men, built the Temple in Jerusalem and reigned over**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

Before David dies, he appoints as king his son Solomon, who is 12 years old at the time, with these words:

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*"I go the way of all the earth. You shall be strong, therefore, and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the Lord your God to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes and His commandments and His testimonies. As it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn." (1 King 2:2-3)*

This classic blessing is what today a boy receives on the day of his Bar Mitzvah. It restates the cardinal rule that has guided the Jewish people from the time of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai: in order to prosper just keep the Torah.

**At age 12, King Solomon is granted great wisdom by God.** Shortly after Solomon is anointed king, God appears to him in a dream in which He invites Solomon to make a request for himself. Solomon answers:  
*"I am but a small child ... Give therefore your servant an understanding heart to judge your people..."*

His request pleases God who tells him:

*"Because you have not requested riches and honor but only that which would benefit all the people, I will give you not only an understanding heart like none other before or after you ... but also riches and honor like no other king in your days." (1 Kings 3:7-13)*

Born in 848 BCE, Solomon dies at age 52 in 796 BCE, ruling as king for 40 years -- the best years in all of Israel's history. He is known as *chacham mi'kol ha'adam*, "wisest of all the men." The Bible relates that kings from all over the world came to hear his wisdom, which included not only Torah wisdom, but also wisdom in secular knowledge and science.

*His fame spread through all the surrounding nations. He composed 3,000 parables, and 1,005 poems. He discoursed about trees, from the cedars of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows from the wall. He also discoursed about animals, birds, creeping things and fish. Men of all nations came to hear Solomon's wisdom, as did all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 5:11-14)*

## **THE TEMPLE**

The crowning achievement of Solomon's reign is the building of the Temple which his father, King David, had dreamt about.

As we learned in the last installment in this series, King David brought the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem's Mount Moriah -- "the gate of heaven" -- but because he had been a warrior who had blood on his hands, he was not permitted by God to erect the Temple. However, this is left for his son to accomplish, which he does.

**Solomon's  
magnificent  
Temple took  
seven years to  
build.**

The Bible devotes several chapters to the construction of this most important building to the nation of Israel -- the place of communion between the Jewish people and God. It tells that the entire Temple both inside and outside, including floors and doors were overlaid with gold. Besides this there were bronze structures such as columns, an immersion tank, and basins. The magnificent structure took seven years to build.

When it is finished, Solomon dedicates the Temple:

*"Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain You; how much less this house that I have built? Yet have regard for the prayer of Your servant, and for his supplication, O Lord my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer, which Your servant prays before You today; that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which You have said, 'My name shall be there,' that You may listen to the prayer ... of your people Israel ..."* (1 Kings 8:27-29)

## THE PINNACLE

This is the pinnacle of Jewish history. Everyone is united. Their neighbors don't bother the Jews -- in fact, they come to learn from the Jews. There is peace and prosperity.

This is as good as it gets for Israel. This is the zenith. So why doesn't this golden age last?

Solomon makes one big mistake. He takes too many wives. In fact, he has 700 wives and 300 concubines.

If we go back to the Book of Deuteronomy where the idea that Jews would one day want a king is first discussed, Moses warns that the king should not have too many horses or too many wives (Deut. 17:17). The great Torah commentator Rashi tells us that this means no more than 18, and that King David had only six. So we see that Solomon goes overboard a little bit.

This happens because at this time in history there were only two reasons for marriage among nobility -- to create offspring and to make political alliances.

**The foreign women bring their idols with them to Israel.** The Middle East in Solomon's time is made up of many city-states and all the kings of these city-states want to send their daughters to marry King Solomon and in this way form an alliance with him. That sounds good, but why is it wrong?

The Bible gives us the answer:

*In his old age, his wives turned away Solomon's heart after other gods.* (1 Kings 11:4-5).

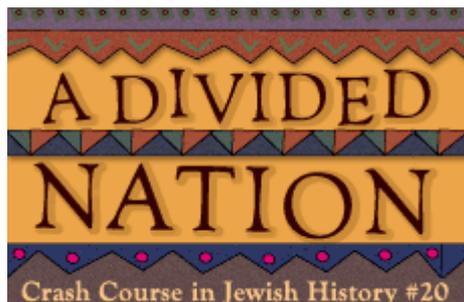
This, of course, does not mean that King Solomon became an idolater, but the Bible uses these harsh words because he did not prevent his wives from carrying on their idolatrous practices. As a king, he is held responsible for the actions of those under his influence.

One of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people, a man on his spiritual level -- who wrote the Song of Songs, the Book of Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Proverbs -- must be suffering eternal pain in heaven knowing what has been written about him in the Bible.

The Bible ends Solomon's story relating that God was angry with him and told him:

*"Since you are guilty of this, and you have not kept My covenant and My laws ... I will tear the kingdom away from you ... But I will not do this in your time, for the sake of your father David. Instead, I will tear it away from your son ... I will give your son one tribe for the sake of My servant David, and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."* (1 Kings 11:9-13)

It is clear from this how much God loved King David and how completely He had forgiven him for his faults. It is also clear that hard times are coming for the Jewish people as the kingdom of Israel is about to be torn in half.



**In response to the king's arrogance, the ten northern tribes secede, splitting Israel in two.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

Although when King Solomon dies in 796 BCE Israel is still a united country, there is some tension between the north and the south.

Ten tribes occupy the north and two (Judah and Benjamin) occupy the south. Jerusalem is middle ground -- it is considered a different place geographically, and a different place spiritually.

Following the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam becomes king, and, in response to the political situation, goes up north to Shechem to have himself crowned. At this time, the northern tribes send a delegation to tell the king their complaints.

Chief of these is the toll that King Solomon's building projects -- the Temple in Jerusalem, his palaces, etc. -- had taken on the people in terms of taxes and forced labor. The northern tribes, in effect, ask the new king for a tax cut.

Rehoboam consults his advisors. The elders who had served under Solomon tell him to ease up on the people: "Speak to them gently, and they will be your servants forever." (1 Kings 12:7) But the young upstarts advise him to show the people who is boss.

**Rehoboam's advisors tell him to show the people who is boss.**

Rehoboam takes the latter advice and announces, "If you think my father was tough on you, just watch me! I'm going to be even tougher."

Big mistake.

Rehoboam forgot that even God had called the Jews stiff-necked people. Jews are stubborn. In response to Rehoboam's arrogance, in the year 796 BCE, the northern tribes secede, creating a new kingdom called Israel. Rehoboam is left with two tribes

and Jerusalem; his kingdom is called Judah.

At first he considers waging war on the north, but the prophet Shemaiah warns him against it, telling him that he cannot possibly win as this rending of the nation had been brought about by God. (For an explanation why, see Part 19.)

The split is clearly bad news -- it is a disaster for many reasons, both spiritual and geopolitical. The once strong, unified nation is now a weak, divided nation, and it is going to fall prey to the re-emerging empires of Egypt and Assyria.

## **THE SCHEMES OF KING JEROBOAM**

The king of the northern country of Israel is Jeroboam ben Navat. He is a great man -- a scholar who was capable of debating King Solomon -- and a great leader.

But unfortunately, the old saying -- "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" -- proves true. Pretty soon, Jeroboam is worrying less about leading the people and more about hanging on to his throne.

Jeroboam sees that the Jewish people in the north are still very strongly connected to Jerusalem -- after all, that is where the Temple stands with its Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant, that is where the presence of God is most strongly felt. On the three big festivals -- Passover, Shavuot and Succot -- the people continue to stream to Jerusalem. He sees that this commonality with the south could bring about a re-unification, in which case he will no longer be king.

**Jeroboam decides to set up an alternative place of worship in the north.** So Jeroboam hatches a scheme. What does he do? He decides to set up an alternative place of worship in the north. He builds two other temples -- one in Bet El and one in Dan (where Tel Dan stands today). That's bad enough in itself. But then he sets up golden calves in these temples. Now he doesn't tell people that these images are gods, per se, but he clearly violates the commandment against graven images. Furthermore, once you open the door to idolatry by introducing alternative sites and alternative modes of worship, it means trouble.

Thus, a terrible period begins in Jewish history. In the next 240 years, there are 19 different kings of the northern kingdom of Israel -- one worse than the next. They are idolaters, corrupt and evil, and they lead the Jewish people into idolatry.

Some of these kings are potentially great leaders, but spiritually they are off. And one thing we know -- if the Jews don't get their act together spiritually, they're not going to have their act together physically either.

So, we see a time period of great political instability and "palace" intrigue, when kings come and go and the succession is usually very bloody.

## **KING AHAB AND JEZEBEL**

Of all the bad kings of Israel, one who stands out on the worst list is King Ahab. Of him the Bible says:

*Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the eyes of God, more than all who had preceded him. (1 Kings 16:30)*

He marries the infamous Jezebel, and built a Temple to the Canaanite deity Baal, popularizing this form of idolatry among the Jewish people.

It's important to understand when you're reading the Books of Kings and looking at what the Jewish people were doing then, that the ancient people of the world were very religious and were always looking for ways to heighten their spirituality, which is why they stumbled onto false gods so often. This may be hard to fathom, because today we don't have the same mentality. The false gods of today's Jewish world are money and humanist secularism. These Jews who went over and worshipped Baal were still keeping kosher and observing other Jewish laws, but they wanted "to have their cake and eat it too" -- they wanted both God and the spiritual high of idolatry.

The prophet of note at this time is Elijah. Elijah yearns to have the Jewish people repent. To this end, he decides to have a "show down" with the priests of Baal and to physically demonstrate the lie of idolatry to the Jewish people.

**Elijah decides to have a "show down" with the priests of Baal.** Elijah goes up north to Mount Carmel. Now if you go today to Mount Carmel, you will see a big mountain range. On one end of this range is Haifa, on the other is a place called Mukhraka, where there is a monastery. In front of the monastery, there stands a statue of Elijah. This is almost certainly the place where Elijah took on the priests of Baal because the geographic description matches perfectly.

Elijah wants the Jewish people to see that idolatry is nonsense and that there's only one God. So he challenges 450 priests of Baal to a contest. He proposes that each side offer a sacrificial bull to their deity and whichever deity sent a fire from heaven to consume the offering in full sight of the people would be accepted as the true God.

The priests of Baal really get into it. They've got their bull on the altar and they are beseeching Baal, shouting to the skies. But after nearly a full day of trying, nothing is happening and the animal carcass is only attracting flies. Meanwhile, Elijah mocks them:

*"Shout louder! After all, he is a god, but he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up." (1 Kings 18:27)*

They shout louder, but still nothing. So they start slashing their heads with knives. Still nothing.

It's really embarrassing now, and all the Jewish people are watching.

Toward the end of the day, Elijah finally gives order for the preparation of his own offering. He has it doused with water three times so it would be even more difficult to set aflame. He even has a water-filled ditch built around the altar. He then says one short prayer:

*"Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that you are the Lord God, and that you have turned their heart back again." (1 Kings 18:36-37)*

With that a fire comes down from the heaven consumes the sacrifice, the wood pile, the stones, the dust, and licks up the water in the ditch.

The gathered multitude responds in awe: "The Lord He is God, the Lord He is God!" (This is the very phrase we shout out during the Yom Kippur liturgy every year; this is where it comes from.)

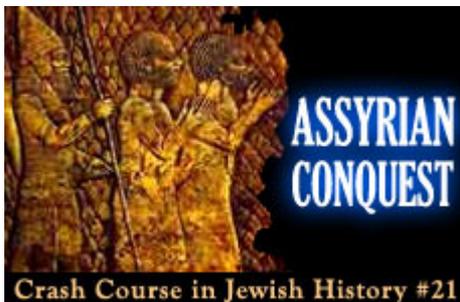
The priests of Baal are put to death. But the story does not end there.

Hearing of what had happened, Jezebel sends a message to Elijah. "Tomorrow I will kill you." She knows that the memory of miracles does not last long. Today, the Jews are shouting "The Lord He is God," but tomorrow is another day.

Sure enough. Idol worship resumes soon enough and Elijah has to flee for his life; and the northern kingdom sinks even further down spiritually.

Eventually, God is going to get tired of this. There is a covenant after all, and the Jews are not keeping their part of the bargain. The covenant clearly specifies that the Land of Israel, along with its bounty, is given to the Jewish people on certain conditions. When they violate those conditions, they will be expelled from the land. And this is about to happen to the northern kingdom, though not yet to the southern kingdom.

The people who are just waiting to take over are the Assyrians, inhabitants of today's Syria.



**The Assyrians, who conquer northern Israel, introduce a new way of dealing with vanquished nations. It's called exile.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

At a time when the Jewish people of the northern kingdom of Israel are weakening spiritually -- which is to say they are also weakening physically/militarily -- the Assyrians are growing stronger.

The Assyrians at this time occupy the territory immediately north -- what is today's Syria, Iraq, and Turkey -- and they are continuing to build their empire.

If you go the British Museum in London, you can see some fascinating Assyrian artifacts from this period.

Following World War I, when the British took over the lands formerly ruled by the Ottoman Empire, they sent their archeologists to the Middle East and took many local ancient treasures to the British Museum.

You can see there the Meshy Stone which depicts the tribute paid by King Jehu of the northern kingdom of Israel to Shalmanaser III, king of Assyria. You can also see a relief from the walls of the magnificent palace at Nineveh, Assyria's capital city.

That palace belonged to King Sennacherib, and the relief shows the siege of the Israelite city of Lachish; it was conquered by Sennacherib, who then boasted about it on his palace walls. The British stripped the relief from the Nineveh palace and brought to the British Museum.

## DATING SYSTEM

The dates that you will find inscribed in the British Museum (and in other museums housing Middle Eastern artifacts) do not agree with Jewish dating that we are following in this series. This is because this series relies on the traditional Jewish dating system for ancient history -- that is for the dates "before the common era," BCE. The Jewish dating system and the Christian dating system vary by as much as 150 years for the Assyrian and Babylonian period, but by the time we get to the Roman period (i.e. the Christian year 1) the discrepancy disappears. Why?

While it is beyond the scope of a crash history course such as this one to present a detailed explanation of the various chronologies of the ancient world, we will explain briefly the dominant dating systems used by modern historians.

The Jewish dating system is taken primarily from a book called *Seder Olam Rabba*, dating back to the 2nd century CE and attributed to Rabbi Yosef ben Halafta. The sources for the dates in Halafta's book come from rabbinic traditions recorded in the Talmud as well as numerous chronologies written in the Hebrew Bible (Tanach).

**Jewish  
chronology relies  
on unbroken  
chain of tradition  
and a highly  
accurate dating  
system.**

It is also essential to remember that traditional Jewish chronologies, (since the beginning of the Jewish calendar almost 6,000 years ago) have always been based on absolute and highly accurate astronomical phenomenon: the movement of the moon around the earth (months) and the earth around sun (years). A combination of an unbroken tradition of the Hebrew Bible and an accurate, astronomical, time-based system, gives traditional Jewish chronology a high degree of accuracy, especially when it comes to the major events of Jewish history.

Contrary to what you might think, the chronology used by modern historians is far from exact. It was not until the 20th century that the entire world recognized one universal calendar system -- the Christian calendar (also known as the Gregorian calendar). If we go back in time however, the calendar situation is far more chaotic. Accurate historical records were almost unheard of and every empire used its own calendar system which was often based on totally different criteria. With no unbroken historical traditional and no universally accepted standard for how to calculate time, there is no non-Jewish equivalent to *Seder Olam Rabba* nor for the Jewish calendrical calculation system passed down from antiquity.

So how do we get the chronology that historians use today?

Historians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries worked backward and pieced it together. This was done primarily through comparing what little historical records survived from ancient Rome, Greece, Mesopotamia and Egypt, together with archaeological finds and radio carbon dating.

Because there are margins of error in all of these methods and much is open to interpretation, significant debates erupted between different scholars which continue to this day. Therefore, the chronologies used by modern historians can best be described as well-educated guesses.

Because this series is written from the traditional Jewish perspective, and because Jewish chronology makes a stronger case for historical accuracy, we have chosen to use the traditional Jewish dates.

Today there are a number of renowned scholars also challenging the modern chronology and even attempting to reconcile it with the Jewish chronology. Amongst them is British scholar Peter James who writes:

By redating the beginning of the Iron Age in Palestine from the early 12th century BCE to the late 10th, a completely new interpretation of the archaeology of Israel can be offered: One which is in perfect harmony with the biblical record. (*Centuries in Darkness* by Peter James; Rutgers University Press, 1993, p. 318.)

With that in mind, we can continue the story.

## **NORTHERN KINGDOM FALLS**

In 6th century BCE, Assyrian king Tiglathpileser III strengthens Assyria and establishes it as a great empire to be reckoned with. (Eventually, Assyria will even challenge the mighty Egypt.) He also introduces a very interesting way of dealing with conquered peoples. It's called exile.

To pacify the lands they invade, the Assyrians take the indigenous people, move them someplace else, and bring others to take their place. By the time the exiles figure out where they are, decades pass and they don't remember to rebel any more.

**In 556 BCE the whole northern part of Israel ceases to exist as a Jewish state.** Starting around 575 BCE, as a way of pacifying the northern kingdom, Tiglathpileser takes over the lands belonging to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, and exiles them. Then, Shalmanaser V, another Assyrian emperor, takes over the lands belonging to the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, and exiles them. Finally in 556 BCE Sargon II, one of the great emperors of Assyria, completes the job, and the whole northern part of the country ceases to exist as a Jewish state.

*And the King of Assyria took Samaria and exiled the Israelites to Assyria, and he settled them in Halah at the [River] Habor, at the River Gozan, and in the cities of Media. This happened because the Israelites sinned against the Lord their God ... they worshipped other gods and followed the customs of the nations ...* (2 Kings 17:6-7)

With the Jews driven out, who takes their place?

The Assyrians bring in a bunch of people from someplace else, who -- because they are now living in *Shomron* or Samaria -- come to be known as Samaritans.

The Samaritans are people who more or less adopt Judaism, but not completely. Because of this, they are never really accepted by the Jewish people, and they're very resentful.

Indeed, the Samaritans have a long history of animosity towards the Jews, and while many people are familiar with the story of the "good Samaritan" from the Christian gospels, in Jewish consciousness (and history) the Samaritans are rarely considered good.

Today there are only about 600 Samaritans left, their cult site is in Mount Grizim, which is right next to the city of Shechem, called Nablus in Arabic.

## THE LOST TRIBES

Meanwhile the Jewish people of the north have scattered through the Assyrian empire. What happens to those ten tribes? They assimilate. They become the ten lost tribes.

There are people throughout the world, especially in the Far East who claim to be descended from the ten lost tribes. A professor of history at the University College in London, Dr. Tutor Parfait, has made it his specialty to track and trace them. He has written a book called "The Thirteenth Gate," and he's researched the people who claim to have Jewish connections.

**It's amazing how many people, many of whom know nothing about Judaism, claim to be descended from Jews.**

It's amazing how many people, many of whom know nothing about Judaism, claim to be descended from Jews. For example, the Pathans, Muslim fundamentalists who reside in northern Afghanistan and Pakistan, claim that some of their five-million-strong population is descended from the ten lost tribes.

There is a Midrash that says the ten lost tribes live "over the River Sambatyon," which is a mystical river that flows all week with sand and stones but "rests" on Shabbat. It is a river that can't be crossed. No such river exists, of course; this is an allegorical way of saying the tribes are gone and they can't come back. Not yet anyway.

We have a concept that at the end of days, all the lost Jews will come back. The great sage, the Vilna Gaon, taught that converts are lost Jewish souls who are trying to find their way back to the Jewish people.

But for now, the ten tribes are gone.

With the Jewish people dispersed from the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians set their sights on the southern kingdom. But this one will not prove so easy. Not to mention they will have some competition from the Babylonians.



**Judah lasts another of 134 years before it, too, falls bringing to an end the kingdom of Israel.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The southern kingdom of Israel -- called Judah -- lasts almost 134 years longer than the northern kingdom. This is largely because it is nowhere near as unstable nor as corrupted by idolatry.

In the north there was a king every dozen years on the average, but in the south the average reign lasts about twice that long.

Unlike the kings of the northern kingdom, some of the kings of the southern kingdom are actually very righteous. And the one king that stands out above the rest is Hezekiah (who, incidentally, is married to the daughter of prophet Isaiah). He is the 14th king after King David, and he rules from 590 to 561 BCE. The Bible says about him:

*And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, like all that his father David had done. And he trusted in the God of Israel. There was none like him among all the kings of Judah who were after him, nor were there before him. (2 Kings 18:3-5)*

Now that's pretty high praise.

During this period of time, the northern kingdom is being picked off by the Assyrians. So Hezekiah fortifies Jerusalem in expectation of the Assyrian invasion of Israel. And some of his handiwork we can see today.

## **FORTIFICATION OF JERUSALEM**

By the time of Hezekiah's time, the city of Jerusalem is no longer confined to the original "city of David." A considerable amount of the population now lives in a new neighborhood on the western side of the Temple Mount. But this part of the city is defenseless, so Hezekiah encloses it with a wall, which has been excavated by archeologists and can be seen today -- it's called the Broad Wall.

Another thing that Hezekiah does is enlarge the water supply system to the city (which, as we saw in Part 18 depends on the Gihon Spring outside the city walls). To do so Hezekiah organizes two teams of diggers to dig a tunnel from Gihon to a reservoir within the city. One team starts on one end, one on the other, and they meet somewhere in between. Considering the limited technology of the day, the tunnel they dig is an amazing piece of work -- 533 meters long.

**Today you can go to the Arab village of Silwan and walk through Hezekiah's water tunnel.** Today you can go to the Arab village of Silwan, just outside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, and walk through this tunnel (the water now is only up to your knees), and you can see the tool marks of the ancient diggers. When the diggers completed the tunnel they left a plaque describing their work and how the two teams of diggers met. Unfortunately the plaque was hacked out of the wall in the 19th century during the Ottoman period. Today it sits in a museum in Istanbul, Turkey".

The city is fortified just in the nick of time before the Assyrians, led by Sennacherib, come to lay siege to the city. This is in the year 547 BCE.

We mentioned earlier (in Part 21) that many of the treasures of the Middle East were captured by the British and are in the British Museum. One of those items is a stone inscription from Sennacherib's time which says: "Hezekiah, King of Judah, I locked in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage." Noticeably absent is the description of Jerusalem falling, because it didn't fall.

The Bible tells us what happened.

The Assyrians besiege the city and it looks like they might win. But a plague hits their camp and 185,000 Assyrian soldiers die overnight.

Sennacherib packs up and runs back home to Assyria where he's murdered not soon after by his children.

One can understand Sennacherib, the blood-thirsty emperor of Assyria, having bad children. But unfortunately, the saintly king Hezekiah did not fare much better in the off-spring department.

## **BAD SEED**

The son of Hezekiah, Manasseh, takes the throne after his father dies. He is as bad as his father was good. Of him the Bible says:

*He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord ... He erected altars to Baal ... He passed his son through fire, practiced astrology and read omens, and performed necromancy and conjured spirits. He was profuse in doing what was evil in the eyes of the Lord, to anger Him." (2 Kings 21:2-6)*

Manasseh is so bad that he even has the prophet Isaiah -- his own grandfather -- put to death.

So it's not surprising that the kingdom goes into a spiritual decline during his reign.

**The kingdom goes into a spiritual decline during his reign.**

The next king -- Amon -- is as bad as Manasseh. But then comes Josiah, who truly loves God and brings about a round of impressive religious reforms. Unfortunately when he dies, these reforms die with him and the spiritual decline continues.

(There is a tradition that Josiah anticipated this and knew that the southern kingdom would soon be invaded as had the northern, so he decided to hide the Ark of the Covenant so that it won't fall into enemy hands. In future installments, we will discuss where it might be today.)

In the meanwhile, the Assyrian empire -- which had been such a great threat to Israel -- had been overrun by a new world power called Babylon. And it is the Babylonians who now invade.

## **THE BABYLONIANS ARE COMING**

The Babylonians march on Israel as part of their campaign to stake claim to the former Assyrian empire. The year is 434 BCE (or 11 years before the destruction of the Temple).

The Babylonian aim is to impose their rule and make what remains of Israel a vassal state. In this they largely succeed, taking into captivity 10,000 of the best and brightest Jews.

A terrible disaster, right? It turns out not to be so. In fact it turns out to be a blessing in disguise as we shall see in the next installment of this series.

**Zedekiah is a weak ruler with a**

**big ego, and he decides to rebel.** The Babylonians appoint their own puppet king from among the Jews -- Zedekiah. This turns out to be a big mistake. Zedekiah is a weak ruler with a big ego, and eventually he decides to rebel. No sooner that he does that than the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar orders a siege of Jerusalem.

Make no mistake about it. This is not happening because Israel rebelled against Babylon. This is happening because Israel rebelled against God. When the Jews have a good relationship with God -- as in the days of King Hezekiah -- they are invincible. Sometimes they don't even need to fight, as when God sends a plague to vanquish their enemies. But if they betray God, no matter how mighty the Israelite army, it will not withstand the enemy.

But as always, God gives the Jews plenty of time to mend their ways as the Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah is calling on all to repent but his message -- which he relentlessly repeats for forty years -- goes unheeded. Instead, he is beaten and thrown into prison!

While in prison Jeremiah writes the Book of Lamentations, which predicts in great detail the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem, but no one pays attention.

Today we read the Book of Lamentations every year on the 9th of Av, the horrible day when these predications came true.

This is the Jewish date that continues to live in infamy (as we saw in Part 13). The 9th of Av -- *Tisha B'Av* is the catastrophic day in Jewish history when the spies sent by Moses to look over the land of Israel came back advising the Israelites not to enter, and God doomed that generation to 40 years of wandering in the desert; when the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians; when the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans; when the Jews of Spain were given an ultimatum by the Inquisition -- leave, convert or die; when World War I, the prelude to the Holocaust, began; and when many other calamities were visited upon the Jewish people.

## **THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM**

The siege lasts two years. There is clear archeological evidence for this event, which you can see for yourself in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Near Hezekiah's Broad Wall, you can visit the Israelite Tower Museum. It's about 60 feet under ground and you can see there the remains of a three-door gate in the northern defensive wall of the city. (Archeologists call it the "E Gate.") At this site, archeologists digging in the early 1970s found clear evidence of the Babylonian siege.

Among the things they found there were Israelite and Babylonian arrowheads. How did they know? The arrowheads have names on them, because in ancient times, arrowheads were very valuable. They also found a layer of charred earth attesting to the burning of the city as is related in the Book of Kings (see 2 Kings 25:9).

After two years of siege the Jews can't hold out anymore. They have been starved into submission.

*The tongue of the suckling infant cleaves to its palate for thirst; young children beg for bread, no one extends it to them. Those who once feasted extravagantly lie destitute in the streets; those who were brought up in scarlet clothing wallow in garbage ... Their appearance has become blacker than soot, they are not recognized in the streets; their skin has shriveled on their bones, it became dry as wood ... Hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food when the daughter of my people was shattered ... (Lamentations 4:4-5,8-10)*

On the 7th of Av, Babylonians breach the walls of the city. They pour in and carry out a mass slaughter.

**After two years of siege the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem and carry out a mass slaughter.**

During the mayhem, Zedekiah tries to flee to the Dead Sea through a secret tunnel that leads out of Jerusalem. But he gets caught and it's very interesting how.

According to a Midrash quoted by Rashi, Nebuzardan, Nebuchadnezzar's captain, is out hunting while his men are pillaging the city. He sees a deer and he begins following it. The deer just happens to run above the tunnel. (This, of course, is God's way of assuring that Zedekiah is not going to escape punishment.) When Zedekiah comes out of the tunnel, there is the deer standing there, and there's Nebuzardan right behind the deer. This is how he gets caught.

Zedekiah meets a horrible fate along with the rest of the Israelites, as the Bible relates:

*And they ... put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him with fetters of bronze, and carried him to Babylon. And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord [the Temple], and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burned he with fire. (2 Kings 25: 7-9)*

With the destruction of the Temple -- on the 9th of Av of the year 422 BCE -- the special connection that the Jewish people had with God is severed.

Here is when it all comes crashing down. Besides the horrific physical destruction, there is also the great spiritual ego-deflation of the Jewish people.

Where previously the Babylonians had been satisfied in making Israel into a vassal state, this time their punishment is much worse. They decide to carry on the Assyrian policy of exile and remove the Jews from the Promised Land.



**The Babylonians think God has abandoned the Jews and celebrate. But they have a surprise coming.**

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, we also wept, when we remembered Zion.  
We hung our lyres on the willows in its midst. For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song; and those who tormented us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.  
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.  
If I do not remember you, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalms 137:1-6)*

The destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylon represents a tremendous shock to the Jewish people. It may be hard to imagine today what it must have meant back then, because we really have no basis of comparison.

In those days normative Judaism meant living with the constant presence of God, which was always accessible at the Temple. Miracles occurred there daily and could be witnessed by anyone. For example, whichever way the wind was blowing, the smoke of the sacrifices always went straight to heaven. Feeling spiritual today is nothing compared what it was like to feel spiritual in the Temple. God was with the Jewish people.

**Everything is gone -- the land, the Temple, God's presence. No wonder Jews wept by the rivers of Babylon.**

The same thing could be said for the land. One miracle that the land exhibited was that every six years there was a bumper crop so that the Jews could take the seventh year -- the sabbatical year -- off from labor. It was amazing.

Now all of that is gone. The land, the Temple, God's presence. No wonder they wept by the rivers of Babylon. However, even in exile God is looking after the Jewish people, even if His presence now is concealed. We see this with the preparation God lays for the exile. In the last installment we noted that when the Babylonians first attacked Israel, they took away 10,000 of the best and the brightest with them. That seemed like a disaster at the time, but now that all the Jews are coming to Babylon it turns out to be a blessing. Why? Because when the Jews arrive in Babylon, there is a Jewish infrastructure in place. Yeshivas have been established, synagogues built, there is a kosher butcher and a *mikveh*. Jewish life can continue and as a result we see hardly any assimilation during the Babylonian exile.

**We see hardly any assimilation during the Babylonian exile.**

If we jump ahead in time 2,500 years to the Jewish migration to America. How different was that? Starting at around 1880, Jews fleeing from persecution in Czarist Russia start coming to the New World. But they don't find yeshivas and synagogues there. And what's the consequence? We get the single greatest mass assimilation of Jews in Jewish history.

Therefore, this turn of events in Babylon turns out to be a tremendously positive thing. It's a great example of God putting the cure before the disease, which we see over and over in Jewish history.

## **SURVIVING EXILE**

God has made a promise to the Jewish people at the time of Mount Sinai that they will be an "eternal nation" and He is going to keep it:

"Thus, even while they [the Jewish people] are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or obliterate them, lest I break my covenant with them by destroying them. For I am the Lord their God; I will remember them because of the covenant I made with their original ancestors whom I brought out from the land of Egypt, in the sight of the nations, so that I might be their God."(Leviticus 26:44)

In all of human history, exiles of an entire people out of their country have been very rare. It's a highly unusual phenomenon to take a whole people and throw them out of their country. *Multiple* exiles are unheard of, since, after the first one, the people generally disappear -- they simply become assimilated among other peoples. As a matter of fact, in human history, multiple exiles and dispersions are unique only to the Jewish people.

And yet the Jews survive despite exile, because God has promised that they will be an "eternal nation."

## LIFE IN EXILE

The Babylonian attitude toward the Jews is "live and let live." And life in Babylonian turns out not to be too awful.

They even appoint a community leader who is the representative to the Babylonian authorities for the Jewish community, beginning with the exiled King of Judah, Jehoiachin (2 Kings 25:27). He is given the title of *Resh Galusa* in Aramaic.

(Aramaic was the international language of the ancient Near East. It is a Semitic language, and it is closely related to Hebrew. It is the language in which most of the Talmud is written. The Jews of Babylon speak Aramaic and even when they return to the land of Israel, they continue to speak Aramaic.)

**Diaspora is a Greek word, meaning "dispersion."** This word *Resh Galusa* means in Hebrew *Rosh Galut*, and in English, "Head of the Diaspora." (Diaspora, incidentally, is a Greek word, meaning "dispersion.") The *Resh Galusa* is a person who is a direct descendant of the House of King David. Even though he's not a king *in* the land of Israel, he's recognized as not only being the representative of the Jewish community in Babylon but also having noble status. As we shall see, over the next 1,500 years, approximately 40 people will hold that title.

They will all trace their ancestry back to King David. This is a noble line that's always preserved in Jewish history.

The oldest Diaspora community in the world is the Babylonian community. There's no question that Jews have lived in Babylon way before the Iraqis. And when the Jews came back to the land of Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there were many so-called "Bavli" Jews coming in from Iraq who could trace their ancestry all the way back to this time of the Babylonian exile.

Why they stayed there so long is because the Babylonians and later the Persians and the Ottomans made life in that part of the world relatively easy. (For example, when the Jews were expelled from Spain, Sultan Bajazet welcomed them with open arms.)

This is not to say, however, that all was peaches and cream. The Book of Daniel tells the story of Jewish young men who refuse to eat non-kosher food or to bow to idols, and who are thrown into a fiery furnace by

Nebuchadnezzar. They miraculously survive, causing Nebuchadnezzar to issue an edict forbidding anyone to blaspheme the God of Israel.

## WRITING ON THE WALL

The last king of Babylon is Belshazzar. Like many of the other neighboring kings, Belshazzar is well versed in Jewish prophecy. Why? Because, in the polytheistic world, the God of Israel had a reputation. He had to be reckoned with and therefore the rulers kept up with Jewish beliefs.

Belshazzar is aware of what the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied at the time when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Israel:

*"And this whole land [of Israel] shall be a ruin, and a waste, and these nations [the tribes of Israel] shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when the seventy years are fulfilled, that I will punish the king of Babylon ..."* (Jeremiah 25:11-12)

Naturally, this is something Belshazzar is worried about and so he keeps a count. But he miscalculates by one year. When the year 371 BCE arrives, Belshazzar thinks the prophecy will not come through -- God has abandoned the Jews and will not restore them to Israel as promised in Jeremiah prophecy:

*For thus said the Lord, "After seventy years for Babylonia have been completed, I will attend to you, and I will fulfill for you My favorable promise -- to return you to this place."* (Jeremiah 29:10)

In celebration, Belshazzar throws a huge feast and brings out for all to see the Temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from Jerusalem. He orders his consorts and concubines to drink from Temple cups and to praise "the gods of gold and silver, copper, iron, wood and stone." (Daniel 5:1-5)

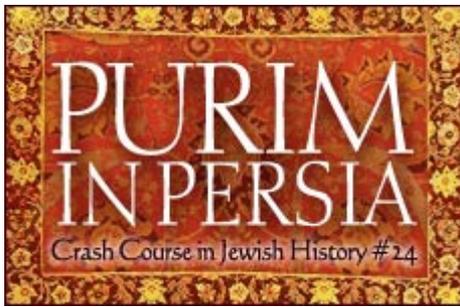
**At that moment, a large unattached hand appears and starts to write on the wall.** At that moment, a large unattached hand appears and starts to write on the wall. Belshazzar is shaken to the core, but no one can tell him what the strange message on the wall means.

**Finally, the queen recommends that a man be sent for who has a reputation for "extraordinary spirit, intelligence and understanding." This man, of whom it is said that "the spirit of God is in him," is named Daniel.**

Daniel has no trouble reading the writing on the wall. It says:

*"God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end ... your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians."* (Daniel 5:25-28)

That very night invading hordes of Persians and Medes attack. The king and all his party are killed. Only Nebuchadnezzar's grand-daughter, Vashti, survives. She will come to marry the King of Persia, Achashverosh, and unwittingly start in motion one of the great sagas of Jewish history which happens in the days of the Persian Empire.



**Another feast celebrating  
God's abandonment of  
Israel puts in motion a plot  
to annihilate the Jews.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The armies of Medes under Darius and the armies of Persia under Cyrus march into Babylon and conquer it. The Babylonian Empire ceases to exist and it is now absorbed by the new Persian Empire.

So what do we have in that part of the world, just to keep it straight? First Assyria, then Babylon, then Persia - they were all great Mesopotamian empires, one after the other, all interacting with the Jewish people.

In 370 BCE Cyrus issues a decree allowing all the indigenous peoples that had been exiled by the now-defunct Babylonian empire to go back to their homeland. One copy of this decree is on display at the British Museum, and although this version does not specifically mention the Jews, they are included as we learn from the Book of Ezra:

*In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, upon the conclusion of the Lord's prophecy, by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord aroused the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, and he issued a proclamation throughout his kingdom - and in writing as well, saying, "Thus said Cyrus the King of Persia, 'All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord, God of heaven, given to me and He has commanded me to build him a Temple in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of His entire people - may his God be with him - and let him go to Jerusalem which is in Judah and build the Temple of the Lord..." (Ezra 1:3)*

## **GOING HOME**

You would think that the Jews would jump up, pack up and go. But that's not what happens. Of what is probably a million Jews living in the empire, only 42,000 go back - only about 5% of those that went into exile 70 years earlier go back and the remaining 95% stays put.

The same thing happened in 1948 when the state of Israel was declared. There were about 12 million Jews in the world at that time and only 600,000 or 5% settled the land. The rest 95% preferred to stay in exile.

Why?

**Only about 5% of  
the Jews that  
went into exile 70  
years before go  
back to the land  
of Israel.**

The answer is the same for 370 BCE, as it is for 1948, as it is for today. The Diaspora is nice. It's more comfortable to live in Brooklyn or Los Angeles or Toronto than in Israel. Why move if you have a nice big house in America and a nice standard of living and two cars, and you have nice day schools.

This attitude is repeated in Jewish history, and it is a problem. Because God might give the Jews a little breathing space in Diaspora from time to time, but in the long run, He's not going to allow them to stay there.

One of the great patterns we're going to see over and over again is the higher the Jews rise in the Diaspora, the lower they fall. The nicer the Diaspora seems to be at first, the worse the subsequent reaction against the Jews. We see it in Egypt. Jews are invited in, they do well and prosper, and look what happens - they end up slaves. We see this in Spain. We see this in Germany. All the places that once loved and welcomed the Jews eventually turn on them. Therefore, Jews make a mistake if they ever think that the Diaspora is home. It never works for long. Israel is the only home for the Jews.

The 42,000 Jews that go back in 370 BCE immediately start rebuilding Jerusalem, and, of course, the first thing in Jerusalem that they want to rebuild is the Temple, because a Jew can't live a complete Jewish life without a Temple.

The Samaritans, who never liked the Jews and who hate this new influx, immediately send a message to Persia demanding that the Jews be forbidden to continue building. They say that if the Jews are allowed to rebuild the Temple, they're going to rebel.

And, as a result of their threats, Persia freezes the building permit. For 18 years no construction is allowed. And it is during this period that the Purim story, related in the Book of Esther, takes place.

## **MEANWHILE, BACK IN PERSIA**

Back in Persia, a new king has replaced Cyrus. His name is Achashverosh, and he is married to Vashti, the sole survivor of the blood-bath in the royal palace of Belshazzar during the Persian invasion (as noted in Part 23).

Achashverosh throws a party reminiscent of the one that Belshazzar had thrown some years before. He, too, has been calculating and he has decided that the 70 years allotted in Jeremiah's prophecy for the Jews to regain the land of Israel is up.

(In truth, Jeremiah prophecy mentions 70 years in different contexts, one referring to when God would "remember" Jerusalem, and another when God would "redeem" Jerusalem. The first 70 years - counted from the initial conquest of Judea - was up when the Jews were allowed to return to the land. The second - counted from the destruction of the Temple - will not be up for another 14 years when the Temple will finally be rebuilt.)

To this feast, Achashverosh invites the Jews and, unbelievably, they come - to "celebrate" their own end. This gives you an idea how far gone were the Jews who opted to stay in the comfort of the Persian Diaspora.

**To this feast, the king invites the Jews and, unbelievably, they come to "celebrate" their own end.**

Though years before they had "sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept," they had gradually adapted to the comforts of exile to the point that they gradually developed into a positive enjoyment of the pagan way of life and its pleasures. So deep was their desire to fit in that these Jews could actually toast their own public humiliation.

After some drunken revelry featuring (yet again) the Temple vessels, the king orders his wife to appear wearing nothing besides the royal crown. She refuses to come and he has her executed.

Queen-less, the king sends his scouts to round up all the eligible women in the land - and this is how Esther gets nabbed for the palace. No one knows she is Jewish, and her uncle Mordechai tells her to keep her identity secret. The king falls in love with her and from among all the women taken to the palace Esther becomes queen.

(The Book of Esther is best read with the commentary from the Talmud's Tractate Megillah, because there are a lot of fascinating details to the story that are left out from the simple telling. However, these details are beyond the scope of a crash course in Jewish history. For more see the [Aish.com Purim Site](http://www.Aish.com/Purim/Site/).)

## HAMAN, THE AMALEKITE

Achashverosh's top minister is a man named Haman HaAgagi. If that rings a bell, it should. Agag was the king of the nation of Amalek whom King Saul neglected to kill as commanded. Haman is an Amalekite, and he harbors a pathological hatred of the Jewish people. (For a detailed explanation of Amalekite ideology see Part 16.)

And so it comes to pass that Haman gets the king to agree to issue a secret decree to annihilate the Jews of Persia on the 13th day of the Hebrew month of Adar. And how he decides on the best date for genocide is very interesting.

Haman throws lots - called "purim."

Why?

It is part of Amalekite ideology that everything is a random occurrence - everything happens by chance. There is no God running the show. It's the ultimate denial of reality.

**It is part of  
Amalekite  
ideology that  
everything  
happens by  
chance.**

So this holiday which is called Purim - "Chance" - comes to illustrate that, in fact, nothing happens by chance. From the point that Haman throws the lots - flips the dice, so to speak - everything begins to flip on him.

Expecting honors from the king, Haman finds himself forced to bestow these honors on his arch-enemy Mordechai. Invited along with the king to the queen's feast, Haman is preening with pride, only to discover that the queen is Jewish. And that now he is accused of plotting to murder her along with her people. Begging for mercy, he throws himself onto the queen's bed only to be caught by the king in this precarious position and accused of attempted rape.

Things couldn't possibly look worse for Haman and then comes the clincher. Having erected a gallows for Mordechai, he finds them put to an unexpected use when he himself is sentenced to death. And the Jews, whom he had wanted to wipe off the face earth, rather than being annihilated are given the king's permission to annihilate their enemies.

The most fascinating thing about the Book of Esther, which relates this incredible story, is that in the entire text the name of God is never mentioned. We learn from this that after the destruction of the Temple the presence of God was concealed in the world, but that we could still see God acting through history -

delivering one hidden miracle after another to help the Jews survive, keeping his promise that Israel would remain an "eternal nation."

We learn from the Talmud that this state of affairs was actually prophesied in the Book of Deuteronomy, where God says:

*"I will surely conceal My face on that day..."* (Deut. 31:18)

The Hebrew word for "conceal," *hester* - because of its identical root letters with the name Esther - is read as an allusion to this time.

## **HIDDEN FACE OF GOD**

In the time when the First Temple stood, you could see God's presence clearly. You could feel God in Jerusalem. God is always here but since that Temple's destruction the level of spirituality in general is lower and the Jews' ability to relate to God from that period of time onward is much less direct.

From this time forward God will not act in history in the open manner He had previously. But God is always there, nevertheless. He's the master puppeteer behind the scenes putting everything into place.

**From this time forward God will not act in history in the open manner He had previously.**

The Book of Esther is the ultimate story of God putting the cure before the disease. Everything that's a seeming disaster, in hindsight works out, so at the end of the story the Jewish people look back and see how incredible it all was.

This is why on Purim Jews get drunk so that they can't tell the difference between "Blessed be Mordechai" and "Cursed Be Haman." This is to illustrate that even the worst is really serving the will of God. Everything is not what it seems, which is why on Purim it is a custom to wear masks.

The Hebrew word that best describes Purim is *venahafoch hu*, meaning "flipped over story." Whatever bad had seemed to be happening by chance was, in fact, intricately planned for the good. Nothing happens by accident. There's a design to it all.

This, in fact, sums up Jewish history. Just as in the story of Purim when it's over we look back and we see how everything fits into place. Nothing is by chance. Everything has a reason and God will make sure that even in the worst circumstances the Jews are always going to have a way out, so that they can accomplish their mission in this world.

The next part of their mission means rebuilding the Temple. Darius II succeeds Achashverosh as King of Persia. He is believed to be Esther's son and he allows the Jews to finish the job they had started under Cyrus.

This is a very special time in Jewish history when the Jews make a second attempt at getting it right.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The Temple the Babylonians destroyed is rebuilt, but it is never the same – the Ark of the Covenant is missing.**

The re-building of the Temple which had began under Cyrus when the Persians first took over the Babylonian empire, and which was then interrupted for 18 years, resumed with blessing of Darius II, the Persian king whom we believe to be the son of Esther.

The work is completed in 350 BCE and the Temple re-dedicated. But it is not the same.

The intense spirituality of the First Temple cannot be compared to the Second. The constant miracles are gone. Prophecy is gone. The Ark of the Covenant is gone - and although there is a Holy of Holies, it stands empty.

**What happened to the Ark of the Covenant?**

The Ark - this special gold-lined acacia chest which had contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments - was the place where the *Shechina*, the Presence of God, descended from heaven between the outstretched wings of the two golden cherubs. What happened to it? The Talmud (in Ta'anis) talks about it and relates two opinions. One opinion says the Babylonians took it into captivity. The other opinion says that it was hidden by King Josiah who had anticipated the impending invasion and destruction.

[\(See Part 22\)](#)

There's a very famous story told in the Talmud of a *cohen*, a priest, who finds a loose stone on the Temple Mount and realizes that's where the Ark is hidden. On the way to tell others about it, he dies. The point of the story is that the Ark is not meant to be found. Not yet.

## **EZRA**

The Jews who rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem are very well-meaning people but they were sadly lacking in leadership.

To fill the vacuum comes Ezra.

A scribe and scholar and a Jewish community leader in Persia, Ezra, a *cohen*, hears that the Jewish community in the Holy Land is floundering with neither king nor prophet. So, he takes with him 1,496 well-chosen men with leadership abilities and comes to the rescue.

Ezra is so well thought of in the Talmud that it is written of him that "the Torah could have been given to Israel through Ezra, if not that Moses preceded him" (Sanhedrin 21b).

This high praise goes to Ezra for the spiritual rebuilding of the Jewish people and his efforts to reinstate Torah law in the land.

Among his most dramatic reforms is his war against assimilation and inter-marriage.

**Among Ezra's  
most dramatic  
reforms is his war  
against  
assimilation and  
inter-marriage.**

Indeed, the Book of Ezra condemns all the men who had married non-Jewish wives and gives their names -- all 112 of them. (Ezra 10:18-44.)

You might ask: Why the big deal? After all, only 112 guys strayed. Today, millions of Jews are intermarrying -- the intermarriage rate in America is 60%. The difference is that 2,500 years ago, even one Jew intermarrying was an outrage. Now society accepts it as normal. So-called "progressive" congregations in America are even shopping for rabbis who will officiate at mixed marriages - to lend legitimacy to something the Bible repeatedly condemns, and which spells the death of the Jewish people.

Through Ezra's efforts, these mixed marriages are dissolved. All the people are then gathered in Jerusalem - men and women from all over the country - and the Torah is read out loud to all. At the end, all present pledge not to intermarry and to uphold the Torah. (Nehemiah 10:30-31)

## **SPIRITUAL VACUUM**

Despite Ezra's efforts (and those of the other leaders) the Temple is spiritually a shadow of its former self.

At this time, it is also physically a humble edifice. Eventually (circa 30 BCE) it will be rebuilt again by Herod the Great, and made into a spectacular structure, but even though it is going to be physically beautiful, it will be spiritually empty when compared with the First Temple. And even though there are going to be High Priests, the institution will become corrupt.

**The Holy of  
Holies was  
forbidden  
ground, except  
for Yom Kippur.**

According to the Talmud, during the First Temple period of about 410 years, there were only 18 High Priests. During the Second Temple period of 420 years, there were 300 High Priests! We know (from the Talmud, Yoma 9a) that Yochanan was High Priest for 80 years, Shimon was High Priest for 40 years, and Yishmael was High Priest for 10 years. That means in the remaining 290 years there were 298 priests - one ever year or so. What accounts for that?

The Talmud tells us that the Holy of Holies was forbidden ground, except for Yom Kippur. On that one day only, the High Priests entered to perform special rites before God. But if he himself was not spiritually pure and unable to focus, he would not be able to stand the intense encounter with God and would die on the spot. We know that during the Second Temple Period a rope had to be tied to the High Priest, so that in case he died, he could be pulled out of the Holy of Holies.

Because the whole High Priesthood was a corrupted institution for most of the Second Temple period, the High Priests died every year. And yet people clamored for the job, which went to the highest bidder. So the question has to be asked: If he was going to die on Yom Kippur, who would want the position? One possible answer is that the candidates had such huge egos that they thought they were the ones who were going to make it. That is how bad things got.

## **LOSS OF PROPHECY**

Why did things get so bad?

[HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)

Largely because prophecy disappeared from the land.

When the prophets were around, heresy was impossible. A prophet talked to God and he'd straighten a heretic right out. No one could deny basic tenets of Judaism in the face of prophecy and open miracles.

But when prophecy disappeared and central authority was weakened, it became easier for people to stray and for various holy institutions (like the High Priesthood) to become corrupt.

**Prophecy disappeared because God was no longer with the Jewish people in the same way as before.**

Prophecy disappeared because God was no longer with the Jewish people in the same way as before. But also because the people themselves were spiritually weaker and could not do the same intense spiritual work required to achieve prophecy.

To be a prophet you have to perfect yourself spiritually, you have to have total self control. It's the ultimate Jewish expression of who being a great man is. The sages say, "Who is a great man? He who conquers himself." [Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1]

Prophecy in the Jewish understanding is not just the ability to predict the future. It is a state of transcendence of the physical world. It means the prophet has entered such a high plane of understanding that he or she is able to communicate with the Infinite.

Moses was the ultimate prophet - that is he reached the highest level of prophecy that is humanly possible. But there were many others - hundreds of thousands, according to the Talmud - who achieved lesser levels and were prophets. In the story of Saul, Part 16, we talked about how the Jewish people consulted the prophets on everything, including lost objects. But that phenomenon all but disappeared with the destruction of the Temple and it did not return with its re-building.

If anyone is interested in how to become a prophet there is an instruction book available. It called "Path of the Just" and it was written in the 18th century by the great Kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, also known as the Ramchal. This is a guidebook on how to get complete control of yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually so you can transcend this world and become a prophet.

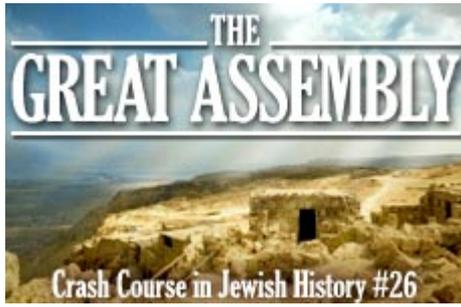
But even if you master that book, you will not be a prophet. Why not? Because prophecy is only possible if the rest of the Jewish people are also spiritually elevated.

**Prophecy is only possible if the rest of the Jewish people are also spiritually elevated.**

As an individual you can reach a tremendously high level but you can only reach so high. To get all the way to the top and break through the threshold, you've got to stand on the shoulders of the Jewish people because there has to be a minimum level of spirituality of the entire nation upon which to rest yourself so that you can reach the level of prophecy. If the nation drops below that level, that threshold, it doesn't matter how much you stand on your tippy-toes and reach up, you're not going to succeed. And during the Second Temple period, we're going to see the Jewish people dropping below a certain threshold of spirituality which they're never going to attain again.

The Talmud says there were definitely individuals living at this time, who, had they lived earlier, would most certainly have been prophets. But the door to prophecy had been slammed in the face of the Jewish people. And we are told that it will not be opened again until the Messianic Era.

Realizing that the Jewish people were growing weaker spiritually, a group of wise leaders came together - expanding the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, from 70 to 120 members - with a special aim of strengthening Judaism. They were the Men of the Great Assembly.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**These extraordinary sages defined the essence of Judaism for the Jews of Israel and the Diaspora.**

The Men of the Great Assembly - in Hebrew, *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah* - were an unusual group of Jewish personalities who assumed the reigns of Jewish leadership between 410 BCE and 310 BCE. This time period follows the destruction of the First Temple, and includes the initial building of the Second Temple, up until the invasion of the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great.

Realizing that the Jewish people were growing weaker spiritually, a group of wise leaders came together - expanding the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, from 70 to 120 members - with a special aim of strengthening Judaism. Initially gathered together by Ezra (whose efforts to rebuild the Jewish people spiritually we described in [Part 25](#)), they defined Judaism in this tumultuous time when prophecy was all but gone from the Jewish people.

(Today's Israeli Parliament, which is called "the Knesset," also has 120 members in imitation of the Great Assembly.)

Among them we count the last of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, as well as the sages Mordechai, (of the Purim story), Yehoshua, (the High Priest), Nechemia (the chief architect of rebuilding of Jerusalem), Shimon HaTzaddik (also a High Priest).

**Keep in mind that at this time the Talmud has not yet been compiled.** Keep in mind that at this time the Talmud has not yet been compiled. Knowing how to live a Jewish life depends on knowing the commandments of the Torah and their interpretations which have been passed down orally - in short, knowing what is known as the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, both of which date back to Moses' teachings at Sinai.

It is impossible to understand the Written Torah without its Oral complement. For example, when the Written Torah states: "And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart ... and you shall write them upon the door-posts of your house and upon your gateways," it is the Oral Torah that explains which "words" the Written Torah is referring to, and that these words should be penned on a small scroll and affixed to the door frame. Without the Oral Torah we wouldn't know about the mezuzah and countless other ways of day-to-day Judaism.

As the Jewish people struggle with the aftermath of exile, accurate transmission of this oral tradition becomes essential. And here is where the Men of the Great Assembly make the greatest contribution.

As we see in history, to the extent that the Jews stop living according to Jewish law and tradition (i.e. that which makes them Jewish), to that extent they assimilate and disappear. Therefore, the contributions of these men can be said to account to a large measure for Jewish survival.

The Talmud pays them great homage:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and conveyed to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly ... Shimon HaTzaddik was one of the remnants of the Great Assembly. He used to say, "The world stands on three things: on the Torah; on the service of God, and upon acts of loving-kindness..." (Avot 1:1)

## THE CONTENTS OF THE BIBLE

In addition to insuring the accurate transmission of the Oral Torah, the Men of the Great Assembly decide which of the multitude of Jewish holy writings should be in the Bible. The Jewish people have produced hundreds of thousands of prophets (both men and women). Which of their writings should be preserved for future generations and which had limited applicability?

The Men of the Great Assembly make this decision and give us what is known as the Hebrew Bible today - or the *Tanach*. (*Tanach* is a Hebrew acronym which stands for Torah, Prophets, Writings.)

**This is what the Christians call the "Old Testament" but educated Jews never call it that. "Testament" is a Greek word meaning "covenant" and the Hebrew Bible was named so by the Christians because of their belief that God cancelled the covenant he made with the Jews and made a new covenant, "New Testament," with the followers of Jesus. As Jews deny that God would ever "change His mind" after promising the Jews they would be His "eternal nation" (a promise He clearly kept), they find that term insulting.**

The Hebrew Bible consists of the five books of the Torah, eight books of the prophets (the last of which consists of twelve short books) and eleven books of various writings, which include the Psalms (largely attributed to King David), the writings of King Solomon (Song of Songs, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), the books of Job, Ruth, Esther and Daniel etc.

## PRAYER

The last thing that the Men of the Great Assembly do is formalize prayer. They actually begin a process which is not finished until the 2nd century CE, after the destruction of the Second Temple, but they lay down the key principles.

During the First Temple period, there was no formalized Jewish prayer liturgy, because the people had such a close, intense, personal relationship with God. Additionally, a great deal of what is now the object of prayer was formally accomplished through the offering of sacrifices. Of course, when the Second Temple

was rebuilt, sacrifices resumed, but most of the Jews had not returned to the land of Israel and therefore had no access to this medium of communicating with God.

Therefore, the times of the formalized prayer are designed to correspond to times when things were done in the Temple: the morning prayer is designed to correspond to the *Shacharit* Service in the Temple; the afternoon prayer corresponds to the *Mincha* Service; and the evening prayer, *Ma'ariv*, corresponds to the nightly duties (as there were no sacrifices at night).

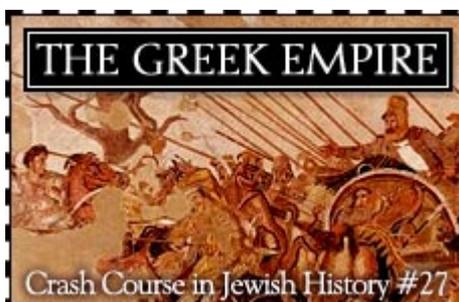
The centerpiece of each selection of prayers (repeated three times a day) is the *Shmonei Esrai*, "The Eighteen Blessings." Each "blessing" is stated in the plural, to underscore the interdependency of the Jewish people, and each blessing is rooted in Torah and Kabbalah.

**The mystical depth of this prayer - a masterpiece of writing by the Great Assembly - is astounding.** The mystical depth of this prayer - a masterpiece of writing by the Great Assembly - is astounding. For example, the blessing for healing is composed of 27 words, corresponding to the 27 words in the verse in the Torah (Exodus 15:26) where God promises to be the Healer of the Jewish people. It is said (Nefesh HaChaim 2:13) that the text of the *Shmonei Esrai* is so spiritually powerful that even when recited without intention, feeling or understanding, its words have a great impact on the world. ([See series of articles on Prayer for further elaboration.](#))

Through Divine inspiration and sheer genius the Men of the Great Assembly were able to create out of the ashes of a physically destroyed nation, a spiritually thriving people. Their work defined and anchored Jewish religious and national identity and created focus, unity and uniformity for the Jewish people, no matter where in the world they might be scattered.

The last surviving member of the Great Assembly was Shimon HaTzaddik. Under him, according to the ancient historian Josephus (*Contra Apion* 1:197), the Jews of Israel prospered and Jewish population in the land reached 350,000.

It helped the Jews physically (if not spiritually) that the Persians were such benevolent dictators. But the picture was about to change with the growing power of the Greek Empire looming on the horizon.



**To the Greeks, what was beautiful was holy; to the Jews, what was holy was beautiful. These views were bound to clash.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The 4th century BCE has been eventful for the Jewish people:

- Exiled to Babylon, they witness the fall of a mighty empire before their very eyes as the Persians invade.

- Permitted to return to the land of Israel by the Persian emperor Cyrus in 370 BCE, they reluctantly take up the offer, with only 42,000 of their number actually returning.
- The returnees' attempts to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem are aborted early as their angry neighbors, the not-so-good Samaritans complain to the emperor.
- In Persia, Haman, the chief minister to King Achashverosh, hatches a plot to annihilate the Jews. But Queen Esther (who is secretly Jewish) comes to the rescue in 355 BCE.
- The next Persian monarch, Darius II, Esther's son, allows the rebuilding of the Temple in 347 BCE.
- The Jewish people living in the land of Israel are re-energized spiritually thanks to the leadership of Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly.

It is now 312 BCE and the last of the Men of the Great Assembly, Shimon HaTzaddik, is High Priest. On the other side of Mediterranean, a new threat is looming. It is called Greece.

## THE RISE OF THE GREEK EMPIRE

The origins of Greece are shrouded in mystery and date back to the time of Abraham, 18th century BCE, or perhaps even earlier. Historians disagree as to where the Greeks came from - they could have been people migrating down from Asia down through Europe and settling in the Greek Isles, or they could have been seafaring people who settled along the coast.

**The earliest inhabitants of mainland Greece, the Mycenaeans, developed an advanced culture.** Whoever they were, the earliest inhabitants of mainland Greece (called Mycenaeans after excavations found at Mycenae) developed an advanced culture. But, around 1100 BCE, the Mycenaeans were invaded by barbarians called Dorians and all their advances disappeared. Greece went into a black period to re-emerge hundreds of years later.

The classical Greek period begins as early as 7th century BCE, though we tend to be more familiar with its history in the 5th century when Greece consists of a group of constantly warring city-states, the most famous being Athens and Sparta. They are strong enough to spurn the Persians despite fighting among themselves, but they succumb in the 4th century to Phillip II of Macedon, who paves way for his son, Alexander the Great, to spread the Greek civilization across the world.

The 4th century is as eventful for the Greeks as it has for the Jews. This is the golden age of classical Greek culture - the birth of democracy, the time of Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato.

## GREEK INHUMANITY

It is easy, while admiring the Greek contributions to civilization - its politics and philosophy - to forget what Greek society was really like.

For example, we've heard of the "Spartan lifestyle," but what did that mean in practice? Well, for starters, at an early age, like first grade, Spartan boys and girls were separated from their parents; they lived in military barracks where they were beaten, and not even given food so that they would learn to steal it. To be Spartan meant to be tough.

The Athenians, not as tough as the Spartans, were not what you'd describe as "soft" either. For example, they thought nothing of killing infants (a common practice in all ancient civilizations even the "elevated" ones). One of the most influential thinkers in Western intellectual history - none other than Aristotle - argued in his Politics (VII.16) that killing children was essential to the functioning of society. He wrote:

*"There must be a law that no imperfect or maimed child shall be brought up. And to avoid an excess in population, some children must be exposed [i.e. exposed on the trash heap to die]. For a limit must be fixed to the population of the state."*

Note the tone of his statement. Aristotle isn't saying "I like killing babies," but he is making a cold, rational calculation: over-population is dangerous, this is the most expedient way to keep it in check.

In warfare, the Greeks invented the "pitched battle" - with thousands of foot soldiers colliding with the enemy, slaughtering and being slaughtered as they advanced. While we tend to think today of the Greeks as cultured and noble, it is shocking to learn how they behaved when bent on conquest.

The one who took the Greek conquests to new heights was, of course, Alexander the Great.

## ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Trained by Aristotle, and heavily influenced by Homer, Alexander comes to power young, at age 20, and goes off to war.

He embarks on what is considered the greatest feat in military history. With a force of 45,000 men he fights non-stop for a dozen years and takes over most of the known world. He leads the Greek army, himself charging in the front lines.

**Alexander is a military genius, winning battles where he is often outnumbered 10 to 1.** He is a military genius, winning battles where he is often outnumbered 10 to 1. His chief tactic is to aim for the strongest (rather than the weakest) point of the enemy line. When he fights the Persians, for example, he goes for the most heavily protected point of the Persian force, aiming to destroy the leadership. When the Persian emperor Darius flees at the battle of Gaugamela, the Persian army collapses. Before dying at age 33 of a fever, Alexander conquers most of Asia, Middle East and parts of North Africa, disassembling the entire Persian Empire and spreading Hellenism - the Greek lifestyle and culture - wherever he goes.

## HELLENISM

What was Hellenism exactly? In a nutshell, it was an approach to life which focused totally on the human being.

The Greeks showcased all human talents - literature, drama, poetry, architecture, sculpture, etc. They glorified the beauty of the human body, displaying athletic prowess in the Olympics. Nothing regarding the human body was considered embarrassing, in need of hiding, or private for that matter.

(Running around naked was considered a normal thing in Greece. Public toilets often consisted of a bench on main street with holes in it; people sat there and did their business as others walked by.)

Naturally, human passions were venerated and this meant there were few sexual taboos - even pedophilia and pederasty. Indeed, the sexual initiation of a young boy by an older man was considered the highest form of love. Plato wrote of this in his *Symposium* (178C):

*"I, for my part, am at a loss to say what greater blessing a man can have in earliest youth than an honorable [older] lover ..."*

Even Greek gods were described in human terms and were often bested by human beings in Greek mythology; with time, it became the style of intellectual Greeks to denigrate their gods and speak of them with biting cynicism and disrespect.

In short, the Greeks introduced into human consciousness an idea which is going to come into play as one of the most powerful intellectual forces in modern history - humanism. The human being is the center of all things. The human mind and its ability to understand and observe and comprehend things rationally is the be-all-and-end-all. That's an idea which comes from the Greeks.

Above all, the Greeks thought that this was enlightenment, the highest level of civilization. They had a strong sense of destiny and believed that their culture was ordained to become the universal culture of humanity.

Of course, the Jews had a different vision. The Jews believed that a world united in the belief in one God and ascribing to one absolute standard of moral values - including respect for life, peace, justice, and social responsibility for the weak and poor - was the ultimate future of the human race.

**Jewish ideology was wedded to an extreme, uncompromising exclusivity of worship - One God and no other.**

This Jewish ideology was wedded to an extreme, uncompromising exclusivity of worship (as demanded by the belief in one God) and a complete intolerance of polytheistic religious beliefs or practices. There was only one God and so only one God could be worshipped, end of story.

To the Jews, human beings were created in the image of God. To the Greeks, gods were made in the image of human beings. To the Jews, the physical world was something to be perfected and elevated spiritually. To the Greeks the physical world was perfect. As Dennis Prager once put it, "To Greeks, what was beautiful was holy; to the Jews what was holy was beautiful."

Such disparate views were bound to clash, sooner or later.

## **THE GREEKS VS. THE JEWS**

When the Greeks conquer the Persian Empire in 312 BCE, they occupy Israel as well.

The Talmud (in Yumoh 69a) relates Alexander's arrival in Jerusalem and his meeting with Shimon HaTzaddik, the last of the Men of the Great Assembly. Alexander is planning to destroy the Temple, egged on by the Samaritans who hate the Jews. But, when he meets Shimon HaTzaddik, he is shaken to the core, and he actually bows down before the Jewish sage.

Remember, this is Alexander the Great -- the greatest military genius of all time. He has a great ego to go with his name, and he never bows down to anyone. So this behavior stuns everyone. His generals are awed - what is happening here?

He explains that before every battle - and he has never lost a battle - he has a dream of a strange man. He takes the dream as an omen of victory. And the old man that has just greeted them - Shimon HaTzaddik -- is the man in the dream!

So Alexander the Great does not destroy the Temple. And he listens when Shimon HaTzaddik tells him that the Jews are not enemies of the Greeks but the Samaritans are.

As a result, the Jews are given free rein to go trash the Samaritans, which they promptly go out and do. And Israel and Jerusalem are peacefully absorbed into the Greek Empire.

As a tribute to that, by-the-way, the rabbis of that generation decreed that the first-born sons should be named Alexander. Till today Alexander is a Jewish name though in some circles, it has been shortened to Sender.

**At first, the Greek authorities do not attempt to interfere with Jewish religious practice.**

At first, the Greek authorities preserve the rights of the local Jewish population and do not attempt to interfere with Jewish religious practice. The Jews continue to flourish as a separate and distinct entity for 165 years - a rare phenomenon in the Hellenistic world.

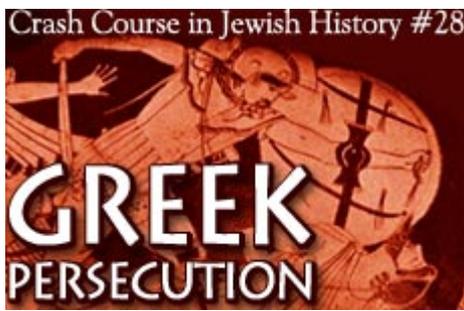
The vast majority of the peoples conquered by Alexander the Great have willingly allowed themselves to be Hellenized. The fact that the Jews - with the exception of a small minority - reject Hellenism is a strong testament to that ever-present Jewish drive and sense of mission.

The famed classical historian Michael Grant, in his *From Alexander to Cleopatra* (p. 75), explains:

The Jews proved not only unassimilated, but unassimilable, and ... the demonstration that this was so proved one of the most significant turning-points in Greek history, owing to the gigantic influence exerted throughout subsequent ages by their religion...

But with time, Judaism, with its intractable beliefs and bizarre practices, begins to stand out as an open challenge to the concept of Hellenistic world supremacy.

For the generally tolerant Greeks, this challenge becomes more and more intolerable. It is only a matter of time before open conflict will arise.



**Terror reigned -- women who allowed their sons to be circumcised were killed with their babies tied around their necks.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

Following the death of Alexander the Great, the vast Greek Empire is made up of three parts:

- Seleucid or Assyrian Greece
- Ptolemaic or Egyptian Greece
- Macedonian or Greece proper, including the independent city-states of Athens, Sparta, etc.

Initially, Israel falls under the part ruled by Ptolemies of Egypt. They are generally liberal and open-minded in keeping with the spirit of their capital city of Alexandria which is the world's cultural center.

But this changes in 198 BCE after the Battle of Pnyas (or Banyas, a site in northern Israel which we can visit today) when the Seleucids of Assyria take over control of Israel from the Ptolemies.

However, the picture is volatile. And the new Seleucid emperor, Antiochus Epiphanes, finds himself under a lot of pressure, holding back the Ptolemies and worrying about the rising might of Rome.

He decides that the weak link in his defenses is Israel. Israel is bordered by Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea (from whence the Romans could come), and, worst of all, the Jews are not into Greek culture. This situation he now moves to remedy.

## **WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE**

Some years before, when the Greeks who had conquered the entire known world first met the Jews, they were astonished. They'd never encountered people like this before.

The Jews were then the only monotheists in the world and they subscribed to a worldview that is totally different from anyone else's - namely, that everything that exists had been created and is sustained by one infinite, invisible and caring God. This idea - particularly that this caring Being busies Himself with the lives of mortals - the Greeks found just about incomprehensible.

**Jewish ideals of peace, brotherhood, social responsibility etc. were far removed from Greek values.**

On top of that, the Greeks could not understand the Jewish view of the Torah. This was an ancient book, which the Jews claimed they got from God, and which contained odd teachings on how to lead a life of peace, brotherhood, social responsibility, respect for life - all values that were far removed from the Greek idea of a [perfect world](#).

In short, the Greeks didn't know what to make of the Jews.

The Jews were likewise confounded. The Greeks were people who valued education and intellectual pursuits - something the Jews also valued and very much admired. The Greeks spoke a beautiful language, which the Jews appreciated very much. (The Talmud says that Greek is the most beautiful language in the world, it's the only language you can write a kosher Torah scroll besides Hebrew.)

Indeed, the Torah was promptly translated into Greek (in the 3rd century BCE) - the first such translation in Jewish history. This translation was called the "Septuagint" after the 70 rabbis who did it.

(This translation is considered a national disaster for the Jewish people. In the hands of the non-Jewish world, the now accessible Hebrew Bible has often been used against the Jews, and has been deliberately mistranslated. Most Christian Bibles in English today depend on the Greek translation which was then translated into Latin, the language of the Roman Empire, and from there into English. You can just imagine how many interpretations and mistakes were made along the way.)

However, it was inevitable that the Hebrew Bible would be translated into Greek because Greek became the language of the ancient Mediterranean world. It was as common everywhere as English is today! And the Jews who were mostly speaking Aramaic thanks to their foray in the Babylonian exile become conversant in Greek as well. (Hebrew was then a language primarily of prayer and of study.)

Despite this mutual appreciation - which incidentally lured a lot of Jews - the vast differences could not be tolerated by the dominant culture for long.

## **FORCED HELLENIZATION**

The honeymoon period ends with a bang as Antiochus Epiphanes takes deliberate steps between 169 BCE and 167 BCE to Hellenize the Jews of Israel by attempting to destroy Judaism. The Book of Maccabees calls this period a "reign of terror."

The first thing that Antiochus does is to make the seat of Jewish power his own. He removes the High Priest from his position and replaces him with a Jew that he has in his back pocket. From this point on the High Priesthood becomes, to a large extent, a corrupt institution (as we explained in [Part 25](#)).

So here we begin to see a pattern which is going to evolve through later Jewish history of all the basic institutions being corrupted: the monarchy, the priesthood, the Temple service. What's going to be left relatively intact is the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, and its rabbis who will eventually write the Talmud, as we shall see.

After he installs his own High Priest, Antiochus tries to dissolve the Jewish calendar.

**We have the Greeks to thank for the invention of religious persecution, a concept then unknown in history.**

Antiochus, by this time, understands the Jews very well. To him these people are time obsessed - they try to make time holy. Destroy time and you destroy the Jews' ability to practice Judaism. Therefore, Antiochus forbids the observance of Shabbat, the observance of the New Moon (Rosh Hodesh), and the observance of the holidays - Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot.

Next, Antiochus forbids keeping kosher and studying Torah. Torah scrolls are publicly burned, and swine are sacrificed over sacred Jewish books to defile them. Indeed, Antiochus seems obsessed by swine, knowing that this animal is particularly repugnant to the Jews; he even forces the High Priest to institute swine sacrifices in

the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and also to permit worship there of a whole array of Greek gods. (See 1 Maccabees 1:41-64.)

Lastly, Antiochus forbids circumcision. To the Jews, this is the physical, tangible sign of their covenant with God. And it's the one thing the Greeks - who worship the perfection of the human body - find most abhorrent. To them, circumcision is a mutilation.

Jews resist, so Antiochus and his henchmen go about driving the point home in a crude and cruel fashion. The Jewish historian, Rabbi Berel Wein relates this graphically in his *Echoes of Glory*:

Women who allowed their sons to be circumcised were killed with their sons tied around their necks. The scholars of Israel were hounded, hunted down and killed. Jews who refused to eat pork or sacrifice hogs were tortured to death ... Even the smallest hamlet in Judah was not safe from the oppression of the Hellenists. The altars to Zeus and other pagan deities were erected in every village, and Jews of every area were forced to participate in the sacrificial services. (p. 63)

This type of religious persecution was, until then, unknown in human history. Up to that time, no one in the ancient world declared war on other people's religions, because the attitude of polytheism was "I'll worship your god, your worship mine. The more gods the merrier."

(Later we will see Greek and Roman mythologies blending with Zeus becoming Jupiter, etc. The ultimate in pluralism - everyone's religion is as good as the next.)

In the polytheistic world no one died for their religion. No one, except the Jews.

The Jews maintain that there are things in this life that are worth dying for - things that are more meaningful than life itself. Jews are willing to give up their lives for Judaism. Not because God needs people to die for Him but because the ideology of Torah is something without which humanity is doomed. The Jews, who are supposed to be "the light unto the nations," cannot abandon their mission, even when their lives are threatened.

Of course, Jews don't have to be lambs going to the slaughter - they can fight against this type of tyranny and they do. What is most terrible in this fight, however, is that the Jews who are defending Judaism must fight the Greeks as well as some of their own fellow Jews who have converted to Hellenism.

## **JEW VS. JEW**

When the Greeks attack Judaism they do it with the help of a certain splinter sect of the Jewish people -- the Hellenized Jews.

These were Jews who were sucked into Greek culture. And it is no wonder why. Greek culture was the major culture milieu of the ancient world.

**A small but very vocal and powerful group of Jews aligned itself with the Greek authorities.** We see this as pattern in Jewish history. A world culture comes along which is enlightened and progressive and is changing the world, and some of the upper class Jews always get into it. Why? Because they are rich, sophisticated, and have a lot of spare time. Then they say to the rest of the Jewish people: "Let's get modern. Forget this ancient Jewish stuff." (We will see this pattern repeated in Spain, and in Germany, and even today in America.)

At this time, we have a small but very vocal and powerful group of Jews, who align with the Greek authorities and who become Hellenized. They do everything the Greeks do.

They send their children to the gymnasium, and they reverse their circumcisions - a very painful operation - since so much of Greek stuff is done naked and the Greeks would consider them mutilated otherwise.

To make matters worse, the schism between the Hellenized Jews and mainstream Jews is paralleled by another schism -- between two factions of religious Jews.

It begins when two teachers named - Zadok and Bysos - begin preaching a new form of Judaism, devoid of belief in the Divinity of the Oral Torah (which we explained in Part 26). Their followers are called the Sadducees and Bysosim, though it is the Sadducees that go down in history. The mainstream observant Jews, who keep Jewish law as it has always been practiced, are called ironically "Pharisees," meaning "separatists," to distinguish them from the others.

Since the Sadducees do not believe that the Oral Torah comes from God, they maintain that they are only obligated to keep the laws of the Written Torah, which they read literally. But so many of the laws of the Written Torah are incomprehensible without the Oral Torah. Their answer? Each man for himself - anyone can decide what it means and act accordingly.

The Sadducees find natural allies among the Hellenized Jews, as Rabbi Berel Wein explains:

The Sadducees were always more acceptable in the eyes of the Hellenist Jews than their rabbinic foes. The alliance of the Hellenists and the Sadducees against traditional Judaism guaranteed constant turmoil in Jewish life throughout the time of the Second Temple and even thereafter. (*Echoes of Glory*, p. 38)

(We shall discuss the Sadducees in greater detail in future segments when we come to the Roman Empire and its domination of the Jews.)

This is how the ancient historian Josephus in his *Contra Apion* explains the beliefs of the Jews at this time:

The Pharisees [who are considered most skillful in the exact explication of their laws and are the leading school] ascribe all to fate and to God and yet allow that to do what is right or to the contrary is principally the power of men, although fate does cooperate in every action. They say that all souls are imperishable but

that the souls of good men only pass into other bodies while the souls of evil men are subject to eternal punishment.

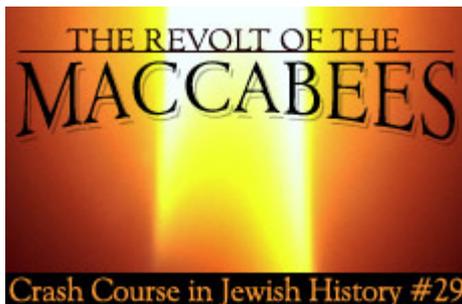
But the Sadducees are those that compose the second order and exclude fate entirely and suppose that God is not concerned with our doing or not doing what is evil. They say that to do what is good or what is evil is man's own choice and that the choice of one or the other belongs to each person who may act as he pleases. They also exclude the belief in immortality of the soul and the punishment and rewards of the afterworld.

Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another and cultivate harmonious relations with the community, but the behavior of the Sadducees towards one another is to some degree boorish, and their conversation with those that of their own party is barbarous as if they were strangers to them.

You can see how the Sadducees were influenced by Greek thought. They are part of the reason that the High Priesthood and the Temple service became so corrupt (as many of the priestly class, an upper class at that time, became Sadducees). And this is why the Talmud says that so many High Priests died during the service of Yom Kippur. ([SeePart 25](#) )

The corruption of the Temple and the forced Hellenization and persecution finally becomes too much to bear for mainstream observant Jews. When they finally revolt against the Greeks, they take on their collaborators among the Jews as well.

The revolt of the Maccabees - which we celebrate today as Chanukah - is as much a story of a civil war between Jews as against Greece. It's not a war for national liberation, nor is it a struggle for physical freedom - it is a struggle of ideas.



**The Jewish revolt against the Greeks sets a precedent in human history - it becomes the world's first religious war.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

We know the details of the Jewish fight against the Greeks and Hellenism from the two Books of the Maccabees.

(These chronicles are not included in the Hebrew Bible because, as we learned in Part 26, the Men of the Great Assembly had decided many years earlier what the Hebrew Bible should consist of and these events occurred much later in time. The Books of the Maccabees, which were probably written by a Hasmonean chronicler, who was certainly not a prophet, can be found in a collection called *Sefer HaChitzonim* which also contains other writings left out of the Hebrew Bible and which are mentioned or quoted in the Talmud.)

This revolt of the Jews sets a precedent in human history. It is the world's first ideological/religious war. No one in the ancient world died for their gods; only the Jews thought that their religion - the only monotheistic religion at the time - was worth dying for.

But (as we saw in Part 28), it is not just a war against the Greeks, it is also a civil war - Jews, who were loyal to Judaism, fighting other Jews, who had become Hellenized and who were siding with the Greeks.

The year is 167 BCE and the horrible persecution of Judaism by the Greeks is in full swing. The Greek troops show up in the town of Modi'in (a site west of Jerusalem which you can visit today off the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway) and demand that the Jews there sacrifice a pig to the Greek gods. The elder of the town, Mattathias, who is a *cohen*, that is of the priestly class, refuses.

**One Hellenized Jew is willing to do what is unspeakable in Jewish eyes -- sacrifice a pig.**

But there is a Hellenized Jew in the town who is willing to do what is unspeakable in Jewish eyes. As he's about to sacrifice the pig, Mattathias stabs him, also killing the Greek official present. He then turns to the crowd and announces: "Follow me, all of you who are for God's law and stand by the covenant." (1 Maccabees 2:27)

Those who join Mattathias and his five sons - named Judah, Elazar, Yohanan, Yonaton and Shimon - head for the hills, expecting that the Greeks are going to come back and wipe out the whole village as a reprisal. In the hills, they organize a guerilla army, led primarily by the oldest of the sons named Judah, nicknamed Maccabee, which means "the Hammer." Maccabee is also an acronym for *mi komocho ba'alim Hashem*, "who is like you among the powers O God," - the battle cry of the Jewish people.

We don't know exactly how large this Maccabee army was, but even the most optimistic estimates put the number at no more than 12,000 men. This tiny force takes on the fighting Greek army of up to 40,000 men.

It's not just a numerical superiority the Greeks have. The Greeks are professional soldiers - they have equipment, they have training, and they have a herd of war elephants, which were the tanks of the ancient world. The Jews are vastly outnumbered, poorly trained, and poorly equipped (not to mention, they have no elephants), but what they lack in training and equipment they make up in spirit.

Most of the battles take place in the foothills leading from the coastal plain area (Tel Aviv) to Jerusalem. The Greeks are trying to march their armies up the natural canyons that lead into the mountain areas, the stronghold of the Jewish army. There's only a few places where the Greeks can ascend and this is where the Maccabees choose to take them on.

Now when we read the story of the Maccabees it seems like it's something that takes place over a few weeks - the battles take place, the Jews win, and the Greeks go home. But, in fact, it takes 25 years of fighting and a great many casualties on both sides.

## CHANUKAH

After the first three years, the Jews are able re-conquer Jerusalem. They find the Temple defiled and turned into a pagan sanctuary, where pigs are sacrificed on the altar. When they re-enter the Temple, the first thing they do is try to light a make-shift menorah (as the real gold one had been melted down by the Greeks) but only one vial of pure lamp oil with the special seal is discovered. They use this vial to light the menorah and

miraculously it stays lit for eight days, by which time fresh pure oil has been pressed and delivered to the Temple.

**The Maccabees then purify the Temple and rededicate it on the 25th of Kislev.**

The Maccabees then purify the Temple and rededicate it on the 25th of Kislev, which is the date on the Hebrew calendar when we begin to celebrate the eight days of Chanukah. (The Hebrew word *Chanukah* means "dedication" or "inauguration.")

Chanukah - one of two holidays added to the Jewish calendar by the rabbis - celebrates two kinds of miracles: 1) the military victory of the vastly outnumbered Jews against the Greeks; and 2) the spiritual victory of Jewish values over those of the Greek. It is this spiritual victory which is symbolized by the lights of Chanukah.

(For more on Chanukah [click here.](#))

The rededication of the Temple does not end the fight however. Unfortunately, some of the Hellenized Jews are not happy that the Maccabees took over Jerusalem, and they join forces with the Greeks and the fight continues.

It's not until 142 BCE, during the reign of Seleucid monarch Demetrius, that the Greeks finally have enough of the fighting and sign a peace treaty with Simon, the last survivor of the five sons of Mattathias.

In [that] year, Israel was released from the gentile yoke; the people began to write on their contracts and agreements: "In the first year of Simon, the great High Priest, general and leader of the Jews." (1 Maccabees 13:41-42)

Thus Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel is officially restored.

## THE REIGN OF THE HASMONEANS

As noted above, Mattathias was a *cohen*, and so it is not surprising that his son, Simon, should become High Priest. But Simon also takes on himself the title of nasi meaning "prince/president/leader." He did not call himself king because he knew full well that a Jewish king could only come from the line of David.

(The line of David - the line of kings - comes from the tribe of Judah, whereas the line of the *cohanim*, the priests, comes from the tribe of Levi, as per the blessing of Jacob on his twelve sons, the twelve tribes of Israel.)

**The Hasmoneans should not have been kings in the first place and they became corrupted by power.**

This is a bad choice on the part of Simon because his descendants do not respect this distinction. They start a new ruling dynasty in Israel - the Hasmonean dynasty - which lasts for 103 years and which is marked by a terrible moral and religious decline. They should not have been kings in the first place and then they became corrupted by their own power.

The next ruler is Yochanan Hyrcanus, and we can see from his name the Greek influence that is creeping in -- the Hasmoneans are becoming Hellenized. This is a terrible tragedy since their ancestors had given their lives to throw off the yoke of Hellenism.

Among his many errors, Yochanan Hyrcanus does a terrible anti-Jewish thing. As part of his effort to expand the borders of Israel, he forcibly converts the newly conquered peoples. This is something Judaism has never done before nor since -- Jews discourage converts rather than the other way around.

One of the peoples that are forcibly converted at this time are the Idumeans. And this error costs the Jews dearly.

In Israel, near Beit Shemesh, there is a fascinating archeological site open to tourists called Beit Guvrin Maresha. It consists of some 2,000 caves that are mostly cut in the limestone. This was one of the major cities of the Idumeans. And you can even play archeologist and go there and dig for a day. This is one of the places that the Hasmoneans conquered, giving the people a choice - convert or leave.

One of the Idumean families that is forcibly converted will become very significant for its role in the drama some years later when the Romans invade. A descendant of this family - Herod - will be appointed Jewish king and he will be a schizophrenic ruler. He will murder the High Priest, 45 members of the Jewish Supreme Court as well as most of his own family, but he will also embark on a series of fantastic building projects that will include the city of Caesarea, the fortress at Masada, and a total re-building of the Temple. As we will see, Herod (who is only nominally Jewish) will have a very schizophrenic relationship with the Jews.

## DECLINE OF JEWISH RULE

The son of Yochananon Hyracanus, Alexander Yanai, is a classic case of Hasmonean ruler gone totally off. He is completely Hellenized and siding with the Sadducees (the Jews who only follow the Written Torah, making up their own interpretations) against the Pharisees (the mainstream Jews).

When some of the Pharisees oppose him, he has 800 of them executed after first forcing them to watch the slaughter of their families. During the executions, Alexander Yannai hosts a Greek-style feast.

This is a classic case of one of the great tragic families starting off so illustriously and ending so disastrously, bringing the Jewish people to ruin.

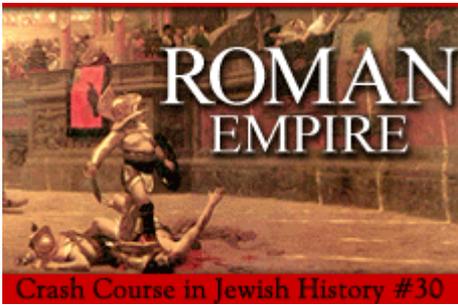
**Alexander Yannai has 800 of his opponents executed after first slaughtering their families in front of them.**

The last two Hasmonean rulers are two brothers Hyrcanus and Aristobolus, both of whom are totally Hellenized. Hyrcanus is the weaker of the two but he has a strong advisor by the name of Antipater, a descendant of Idumean converts to Judaism (who just happens to have a baby boy named Herod).

The brothers are fighting with each other as to who should be king. The obvious answer is neither. But tell that to morally corrupt, power hungry men. They hit on the idea of asking Rome to mediate in their dispute.

Inviting the Romans in is not like inviting a multi-national peace-keeping force or international mediation team. We're talking about people with an incredible energy to conquer and gain all the territory they can.

The year is 63 BCE and the great Roman general Pompeii is cleaning up the last of the Greek Empire. He is more than happy to oblige and move his armies into Israel.



**Jewish tradition maintains the Romans were descendants of Esau, the red-haired and blood-thirsty brother of Jacob**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

Before we tell the story of how the Second Commonwealth of Israel met its sad end at the hands of the Roman Empire, let us step back in time and delve into what Rome was about, and how it became a power that challenged the mighty Greeks.

Rome started out as a city-state, dating its history to 753 BCE. The founding of the city is rooted in a famous legend:

It was common practice of the settlers of the banks of the Tiber River to keep "vestal virgins" on whom they believed their fate rested. These young women had to stay pure and chaste, and if any vestal virgin strayed, she was put to death by being buried alive.

In the 8th century BCE one vestal virgin, named Rhea Silvia, found herself pregnant. But she got pregnant through no fault of her own -- she was raped by the god Mars!

(Here we have a familiar story, that predates the Christian one by some 800 years -- a woman who has a physical relationship with a god, ergo est, as they say in Latin, she remains a virgin yet she gives birth.)

Silvia Rhea gave birth to twins - Romulus and Remus - but the local king did not recognize them as demi-gods. Instead, he had them thrown into the Tiber River. Miraculously, they floated ashore, were nursed by a she-wolf, and then reared by a shepherd.

**Miraculously, they floated ashore, were nursed by a she-wolf.**

When they grew up, these boys established the city of Rome on seven hills overlooking the Tiber, near the very place where they had been rescued from drowning. (Later Romulus killed Remus and became the god Quirinus.)

Interestingly, Jewish tradition holds that the Romans were the descendants of Esau, the red-haired and blood-thirsty twin brother of Jacob. Judaism calls Rome "Edom", (another name given Esau in Genesis 36:1) from the Hebrew root which means both "red" and "blood." When we look at the Jewish-Roman relationship later on, we will see that the Romans were the spiritual inheritors of the Esau worldview.

## **ROMAN REPUBLIC**

If we skip ahead a few hundred years from the time of Romulus, we find that circa 500 BCE the residents of Rome have overthrown the monarchy ruling them and have established a republic ruled by a senate. An oligarchy, the senate was made up of upper class, land-owning male citizens called the "patricians."

As any healthy and strong ancient civilization, the Romans went to war to expand their sphere of dominance. Roman ambitions met the like-minded Carthaginians, unleashing a titanic struggle known as the Punic Wars, which lasted from 264 to 146 BCE, and in which Rome was victorious.

The Romans went on to conquer the Greek colonies and Greece itself, and to become the great power in the Mediterranean. To a large extent they inherited the Greek view of the world. We call their culture Greco-Roman because -- although Greece and Rome were two different peoples, different civilizations and different cultures -- the Romans to a very large extent viewed themselves as the cultural inheritors of the Greeks.

Later on in Roman history, many Romans will view themselves, literally, as the reincarnation of the Greeks. The Greeks influenced Roman architecture and much of the Roman worldview in many respects. But the Romans made their own unique contributions as well.

For one thing Rome was much more conservative, patriarchal society than Greece was. The Romans were also very hard-working and extremely well organized, and this is what made them masters of empire-building.

We see their ability to organize in all spheres:

- We see it in their feats of engineering. Everywhere we look where the Romans dominated, we find Roman aqueducts, Roman roads, Roman fortifications, Roman walls still standing today. They were incredible builders and had amazing knowledge of how to build.
- We see it in their government and law. They institutionalized a system of law that was used throughout the entire Mediterranean basin.
- We see it in their ability to administer, to collect taxes.
- And most of all, we see it in their ability to systematically wage war and conquer. Conquest and empire building were the greatest feats of Roman organization.

## ROMAN CONQUEST

The Romans revolutionized warfare. Unlike the Greeks, they did not conscript citizens; they employed a professional army. Their soldiers were paid to fight, and they made a lifelong career of it. Soldiering for Rome was not just a job -- it was a way of life. The Roman motto was captured in a famous saying of Julius Caesar, arguably Rome's greatest general: *Veni, vidi, vici* - "I came, I saw, I conquered."

Because they made a career of fighting, Roman soldiers were extremely well trained.

**Julius Caesar summed up the Roman way: "I came, I saw, I conquered."**

And they were also extremely well equipped. Warfare was systematized, giving the Romans an advantage in battle that was unparalleled in human history.

Instead of the big, unwieldy Greek phalanxes that could not move quickly, the Romans created what they called legions, each of which was subdivided into 10 smaller and more mobile cohorts. The legion became the basic unit of the Roman army. The Romans would have between 24 and 28 legions, each with about 5,000

men, mostly infantry with a little cavalry.

The organization of these legions gave the Romans tremendous flexibility on the battlefield; they could be broken down into smaller units that would fight up to a hundred men at a time; they could maneuver around in ways that the Greeks could never do.

This is how the Romans chewed up the Greeks. They simply slaughtered them like they slaughtered everyone they encountered.

This brings us to another key feature of the Roman culture. Although the Romans were very sophisticated people, they were also very brutal, perhaps the most brutal civilization in history.

Their brutality can, of course, be seen in their warfare. They were an incredibly aggressive people, a people with seeming unbridled ambition to conquer everything. (This fits with the Jewish understanding of the descendants of Esau, who was gifted with the power to dominate physically; whereas Esau's twin-brother Jacob was gifted with the power to dominate spiritually.)

But even more strikingly, their brutality can be seen in their forms of entertainment. At 200 different locations throughout the empire, the Romans built amphitheaters where they would spend the day, eating, relaxing and watching people be grotesquely butchered. (The practice was extremely popular and Emperor Augustus in his Acts brags that during his reign he staged games where 10,000 men fought and 3,500 wild beasts were slain.)

This points up a very interesting lesson in human history. We often will find the most sophisticated cultures being the most brutal. You see it with Rome (and later with many others, most recently with Germany).

## **ROMAN EMPIRE**

While the Roman armies were mightily victorious abroad, the republic wasn't doing so well at home.

In the 1st century BCE, Rome had to contend with internal strife and class struggle - of which the slave revolt led by Spartacus (72 BCE) is perhaps the most famous. The so-called "Social War" forced Rome to extend citizenship widely, but the republic was nevertheless doomed.

Pompeii emerged as a popular champion and found allies in Crassus and Julius Caesar, forming the First Triumvirate in 60 BCE. But within ten years Pompeii and Caesar fell out, with Caesar becoming the master of Rome and laying the foundation for the Roman Empire.

This is the point in time where we left off the story back in the land of Israel.

The last two Hasmonean rulers (from the line of the Maccabees) were two brothers: Hyrcanus and Aristobolus. Quarreling with each other as to who should be king, they hit on the idea of asking Rome to mediate in their dispute. And thus, in 63 BCE, Pompeii was invited to move his armies into Israel.

**The Romans  
slaughtered  
scores of Jews  
and made**

**Hyrcanus the puppet ruler of the country.** Josephus, the ancient historian, explains what happened next in great detail.

The Romans came in, slaughtered many Jews and made Hyrcanus, the weaker of the two brothers, the nominal puppet ruler of the country.

This was part of the Roman system. They liked to rule by proxy, allowing the local governor or king to deal with the day-to-day problems of running the country, as long as the Roman tax was paid and Roman laws obeyed!

Roman intervention in Israel had effectively ended Jewish independence and ushered in one of the bleakest periods of Jewish history. Rome ruled, not Hyrcanus, or any Jew for that matter. (The Sanhedrin's authority was abolished by Roman decree six years after Pompeii's conquest.)

The independent state of Israel ceased to exist, and became the Roman province of Judea. Pompeii split up much of the land giving large chunks to his soldiers as a reward for their prowess in battle. Gaza, Jaffa, Ashdod and other Jewish cities were now a part of the map of the Roman Empire.

Hyrcanus, though he might call himself king, got only Jerusalem, along with a few pieces north and south, but even this small area he could not govern without checking in with the Roman proconsul in Damascus.

As we mentioned in Part 29, a key role in the Roman takeover of Israel was played by Hyrcanus' chief advisor - the Idumean general Antipater. The Idumeans bore testimony to an unprecedented lapse in observance among the Jews -- they were the people whom Yochanan Hyrcanus forcibly converted to Judaism.

Antipater, the real strength behind the weak Hyrcanus, made sure, of course, that he positioned his own family in power while he had a chance. He continued to guide Hyrcanus and - when in 49 BCE, Pompeii and Julius Caesar became engaged in internal struggle - helped him choose the winning side. Soon, Antipater was the man in power.

The Romans judged correctly that this forcibly converted Jew did not identify with Jewish values or nationalism, and that with him in power, "militant monotheism" would not again rear its dangerous head.

While Antipater did not go down in history as a household name, his son Herod - who took after his father and then some - did. Coming from a family of forced converts that was only nominally Jewish, he nevertheless became one of the most famous kings of the Jews.

He went down in history as Herod, the Great.



**A madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis, Herod was also the greatest builder in Jewish history.**

[HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)

Herod, the Great (not to be confused with Herod Antipas who came later) is one of the most important characters in Jewish history. He was evil to be sure, but, nevertheless, he remains a very significant person in the terms of understanding this period of Roman domination of the Jewish people.

Herod reigned as king of Judea (via Roman appointment) from 37 BCE until his death in 4 BCE, a very long reign of 33 years, and in many ways a golden period of time in terms of economic prosperity and social stability.

Part of the reason for the prosperity and stability was that during this time, the Romans took a backseat role in the day-to-day life of the Jews.

The general Roman attitude was one of tolerance, meaning Jews were granted exemptions from the official Roman state religion. A very interesting point to remember is that religion and state went together in all empires in the ancient world, and more so in Rome than almost anywhere because Rome also practiced emperor worship -- that is, the Romans deified their emperors posthumously.

Linking state and religion gave the rulers added legitimacy, obviously. The connection between temporal power and spiritual power gave them complete control over the physical existence and spiritual existence of their subjects. (Later, we are going to see the Catholic Church doing the same thing in Medieval Europe.)

**The Romans had learned by the Greek experience that Jews could not be forced to worship idols.**

While accepting the state religion was a vital part of Roman identity and loyalty to the state, the Romans were also pragmatists. They had learned by the Greek experience that Jews could not be forced to worship idols. And they saw for themselves that the Jews were not like other pagan peoples - they were not going to conform. So the Romans granted the Jews an official status of being exempt from Roman state religion.

On the one hand, it was a very smart and very tolerant policy. On the other hand, with that policy also went a punitive tax called *fiscus Judaicus*. You want to be exempt from the state religion? Okay, so long as you pay for the privilege.

So, it might have happened that the Jews simply paid the tax and did their own thing. But it didn't go as smoothly as that (as we shall see).

## **ECONOMIC PROSPERITY**

For the time being, the Jews were doing well - at least economically (if not spiritually), thanks in large part to Herod's amiable relationship with Rome.

Herod had Rome's complete support in administering a very important territory which included several major trade routes. Everything moved through Judea, which was sort of like the great way-station for the incense trade coming from Yemen up the Arabian Peninsula and going out to the Mediterranean.

Additionally, this was one of the most agriculturally productive pieces of land in the Middle East famous for its olive oil (which was used as a main source of light, and not just for cooking), for its dates (the chief sweetener in the times before sugar), and for its wine.

Herod used the huge profits from trade to undertake a series of mammoth building projects - some of the most magnificent in the world.

As a matter of fact if they hadn't closed the list of the wonders of the ancient world before his time, Herod would probably have had half the list to his credit. Almost all archeologists and students of architecture of the ancient world appreciate that he was one of the greatest builders of all human history.

He built relentlessly -- cities, palaces and fortresses, some of which still stand:

- the fortresses at Masada, Antonia and Herodium
- the port city of Caesarea ]
- the huge edifice at the top of the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron
- the massive fortifications around Jerusalem as well as three towers at the entrance to the city (the remains of which are today erroneously named the Tower of David) and much more

At Herodium, in an incredible feat of engineering - Herod built an artificial mountain and, on top of it, a huge palace. Unfortunately, this palace was destroyed in 70 CE during the Great Revolt.

**Herod built another fortress, Masada, on top of a rock plateau in the desert.** He built another fortress, Masada, on top of a mesa, a rock plateau, in the desert. Complete with all the creature comforts in the desert, Masada had an incredible water supply system that fed gardens for growing agricultural staples. (Masada is open to tourists today and a sight to behold.)

**Herod built another fortress, Masada, on top of a rock plateau in the desert.** The port city of Caesarea deserves special mention - not only because it was a center of trade and the Roman administrative capitol of Judea, but because it became a symbol in Jewish eyes of everything that was pagan, Roman, and antithetical to Judaism. Here Herod created an amazing artificial port (one of the two largest in the Empire), put in a beautiful amphitheater, a hippodrome for chariot races (like in the movie *Ben Hur*, bath houses, and a huge temple dedicated to the Roman god-emperor, Augustus Caesar. (You can visit today the excavations of Caesarea Maritima and they are most impressive.)

## HEROD'S TEMPLE

The most ambitious of Herod's projects was the re-building of the Temple, which was almost certainly an attempt to gain popularity among his subjects who, he knew, held him in contempt.

It took 10,000 men ten years just to build the retaining walls around the Temple Mount (on top of which the Muslim shrine, the Dome of the Rock, stands today). The Western Wall (formerly known as the Wailing Wall) is merely part of that 500-meter-long retaining wall that was designed to hold a huge man-made platform that could accommodate twelve football fields.

Why did he make the Temple Mount so large?

**Why did he make the Temple Mount so large?**

Historians estimate that there were about 6-7 million Jews living in the Roman Empire (plus another 1 million in Persia), many of whom would come to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals: Passover, Shavuot and Succot. So you had to have a huge space to accommodate such a huge number of people. Hence the size of the

platform.

When it came to building the Temple itself on top of this platform, Herod truly outdid himself, and even the Talmud acknowledges that the end-result was spectacular.

The Holy of Holies was covered in gold; the walls and columns of the other buildings were of white marble; the floors were of carrara marble, its blue tinge giving the impression of a moving sea of water; the curtains were tapestries of blue, white, scarlet and purple thread, depicting, according to Josephus, "the whole vista of the heavens."

Josephus describes how incredible it looked:

Viewed from without, the Sanctuary had everything that could amaze either mind or eyes. Overlaid all round with stout plates of gold, the first rays of the sun it reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who endeavored to look at it were forced to turn away as if they had looked straight at the sun. To strangers as they approached it seemed in the distance like a mountain covered with snow; for any part not covered with gold was dazzling white... (*The Jewish War*, p. 304)

Herod saw fit however, to place at the main entrance a huge Roman eagle, which the pious Jews saw as a sacrilege. A group of Torah students promptly smashed this emblem of idolatry and oppression, but Herod had them hunted down, dragged in chains to his residence in Jericho, where they were burned alive.

Having built the Temple, Herod took pains to make sure it would be run without future problems of this kind. He appointed his own High Priest, having by then put to death forty-six leading members of the Sanhedrin, the rabbinical court.

## **HEROD'S PERSECUTIONS**

Herod's persecutions were infamous and they even extended to his own family.

Herod, knowing that his Jewish credentials were suspect, had married Miriam -- the granddaughter of Hyrcanus and therefore a Hasmonean princess -- largely to gain legitimacy among the Jewish people. But he also loved her madly. As Josephus relates:

Of the five children which Herod had by Miriam, two of them were daughters and three were sons. The youngest of these sons was educated in Rome and died there but the two eldest he treated as those of royal blood on account of the nobility of their mother and because they were not born until he was king. But what was stronger than all this was his love he bore for Miriam which inflamed him every day to a great degree ...

The problem was that Miriam hated him as much as he loved her, largely because of what he had done to her brother, Aristobulus.

Herod had made Aristobulus High Priest at the age of 17, and watched with trepidation as the young man became hugely popular. This was not surprising as Aristobulus was a Hasmonean with a legitimate right to be High Priest - a genuine Jew and a genuine *cohen*.

But this threatened Herod too much and he had him drowned.

Indeed, Herod later became jealous of his own sons for the same reason and had them murdered as well.

**Herod became  
jealous of his own  
sons and had  
them murdered.**

And he even had his own wife murdered in a fit of jealousy. Josephus again:

His passion also made him stark mad and leaping out of his bed he ran around the palace in a wild manner. His sister Salome took the opportunity also to slander Miriam and to confirm his suspicions about Joseph [Miriam's alleged lover]. Then out of his ungovernable jealousy and rage he commanded both of them to be killed immediately. But as soon as his passion was over he repented of what he had done and as soon as his anger was worn off his affections were kindled again ... Indeed, the flame of his desires for her was so hard that he could not think she was dead but he would appear under his disorders to speak to her as if she were still alive...

Not a stable man to say the least. Even Augustus said of him: "It is better to be Herod's dog than one of his children."

Herod's paranoia, his interference with the Temple hierarchy, and his dedication to the Hellenization of the Jewish people all contributed to the growing discontent that would erupt in a revolt against Rome some 70 years after his death.

## **SPIRITUAL CONFLICT**

Beneath the surface events, there was a deeper spiritual battle raging -- between paganism and Judaism. Additionally, Jewish nationalistic feelings were rising to the surface.

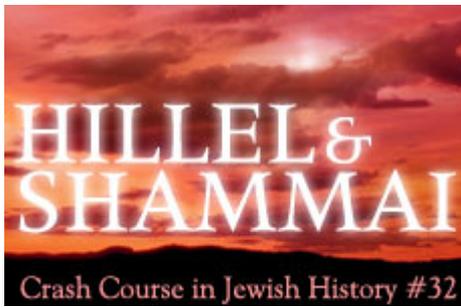
It didn't help matters that Hellenism dominated Judea. A significant number of Greeks as well as other gentiles who adopted the Greek life-style had lived here since the days of the Greek Empire and now, encouraged by the Romans, more Hellenist outsiders came to settle the land.

Additionally, the Jewish upper-classes, though a minority, subscribed to this "higher" culture. And of course, the king was an avowed Hellenist.

Seeing himself as an enlightened leader who would bring his backward people into the modern world, Herod did what he saw necessary to accomplish his "idealistic" end. This included the persecution and murder of all rabbis whom he viewed not only as threats to his authority, but as obstacles to the mass Hellenization of the Jews.

As a result of Herod's interference and the ever-spreading Hellenistic influences among the Jewish upper classes, the Temple hierarchy became very corrupt. The Sadducees, a religious group of the wealthy, who collaborated with the Romans in order to keep their power base, now controlled the Temple, much to the chagrin of the mainstream Jewish majority, the Pharisees, and of the extreme religious minority, the Zealots. (For more on these groups see Part 28.)

The cauldron was beginning to boil and soon it would erupt.



**In a time when many things were going wrong for the Jews, Hillel and Shammai defined what was going right.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In [Part 28](#), we discussed the rift between the Pharisees (the mainstream Jews) and the Sadducees (the Jews who only followed the Written Torah, making up their own interpretations). In [Part 31](#), we further explained how Herod's massacres of rabbis and interference with the Temple hierarchy (not to mention his efforts at further Hellenizing the Jews) contributed to widespread corruption within the priesthood.

But we didn't cover what was right with Judaism.

For one thing, all the normative institutions - the yeshivas, the synagogues, etc. - were all run by the mainstream Jews and were functioning. There was still a Sanhedrin (a Jewish Supreme Court), though its powers had been severely curtailed.

Most importantly, the teachings of the rabbis and the chain of transmission remained undisturbed.

The very opening of *Pirkei Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers") records how the chain of transmission was maintained -- starting with Moses, going on to Joshua, the prophets, the Men of the Great Assembly and so forth.

When Shimon HaTzaddik, the last member of the Great Assembly ([see Part 26](#)) died in 273 BCE, a period began known as the period of the *Zugot*, meaning "pairs."

From that time on, there were always two rabbis at the helm of the Jewish tradition. One was called the *Av Beit Din* (the head of the Sanhedrin), the other was called the *Nasi* (the president). These pairs are all listed in the "Ethics of the Fathers."

The last pair was perhaps the most famous - Hillel and Shammai.

Hillel, who came to Israel from Babylon, was very poor. The Talmud tells some interesting stories about how poor he was and how much he loved learning Torah. For example, he was so poor that he couldn't even afford the couple of *grushim* that it cost to enter the *Beit HaMidrash*, "the House of Study." So in order to learn, he would sit up on the roof and listen through the skylight. One day, he was doing this in terrible cold and became so frozen he passed out. The students down below were suddenly aware that something was blocking the light, went up onto the roof, found him and revived him.

Despite his poverty, which had no impact in how much people respected his wisdom, Hillel achieved the position of *Nasi*; at that time, Shammai held the position of *Av Beis Din*.

**Hillel and Shammai are famous for their disputes in Jewish law.** The schools of Hillel and Shammai are famous for their disputes in Jewish law. One of these concerned whether one should tell a bride on her wedding day that she is beautiful even if this is not true. The school of Shammai held that it is wrong to lie. The school of Hillel held that a bride is always beautiful on her wedding day. (Talmud, Ketubot 16b-17a) The school of Hillel won the dispute. Indeed, Jewish law today generally agrees with the school of Hillel. The Talmud (Eruvin 13b) explains why:

A heavenly voice declared: "The words of both schools are the words of the living God, but the law follows the rulings of the school of Hillel."

So why does the law follow the rulings of the school of Hillel? The Talmud explains that the disciples of Hillel were gentle and modest, and studied both their own opinions and the opinions of the other school, and humbly mentioned the words of the other school before their own.

## **DANGEROUS TIME**

We might recall that in the days of the First Temple, while the rabbis debated points of Jewish law, they did not engage in lengthy disputes. So why were things different in the days of Herod's Temple?

By this time around 1,300 years had passed since Sinai. The Jewish people had been exiled from the land of Israel, and upon their return faced many struggles. The influence of the Greeks, the fight against Greek domination, and the corruption of the Hasmonean rulers, all left their wounds. More recently, there was the Roman occupation and the corruption that came with Herod.

As a result of this unrest, scholarship declined among the Jewish people resulting in an increasing lack of clarity. Indeed, the oral transmission process was starting to fray around the edges. (The Talmud has not yet been written, but the time is coming soon when the rabbis will decide that the Oral Torah must be written down because it might become lost.)

Of course, if you read these disputes in the Talmud today - and the Talmud contains thousands of them - you see that the rabbis were not arguing about anything big, like "can Jews eat pork?" The disputes were usually about small things, some of which had no actual ramifications in the practical application of Jewish law. Many were arguments about theoretical principles which would never apply in any real situation.

A very important point to understand here is that although there were disputes, there were also red lines beyond which no mainstream, traditional, orthodox Jew ever went beyond. All the disputes were on small details, which meant that on the big details everyone agreed.

## **SPIRITUAL DECLINE**

But even if these disputes were small, we have to see them as bad news, because they signified not just a decline in scholarship, but even more importantly, a decline in the spiritual state of the Jewish people. This is called *yeridot hadorot*, "decline of the generations." #The closer Jews were to Mount Sinai, chronologically speaking, the clearer things were.

It's very important to understand how the Jewish people traditionally look at the transmission process. Modern man thinks that the later we get in history the more technology we have, therefore the better we are.

This is not a Jewish idea in either history or spirituality or Jewish law. According to Jewish thought, ancient man was spiritually more sophisticated. And in the realm of the transmission process the closer we were to Mount Sinai, chronologically speaking, the clearer things were.

The entire transmission process of the Jewish people is one of the most amazing aspects of Jewish history. The fact that the Oral Torah has been passed down for thousands of years and has been applied to all kinds of new scenarios, yet the basic body of what is Jewish law has not changed, is amazing.

But the closer the Jews were to Sinai, the more spiritual they were, and the more clearly they understood the will of God. Today, we are the furthest and for us it is a great deal fuzzier. This is why we do not have the authority to uproot Jewish law laid down by the sages who came before us. That's fundamental to the whole transmission process.

The disputes marked the beginning of a process that's going to make Judaism that much more complicated. More and more arguments and debates are coming.

This period of time manifests a symptom of a significant problem plaguing the Jewish people - that of discord.

The discord among the Sadducees, Pharisees and the Zealots created an atmosphere of "senseless hatred" which undermined the unity of the Jewish people just as they had decided to revolt against Rome.



**In a seemingly suicidal move, Jews decided to take on the might of Rome.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

A rebellion against Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE would be the equivalent today of Israel declaring war on the Western Europe and Eastern Europe combined. That's how mighty Rome was.

So how did the Jews decide to take on such a seemingly suicidal challenge? This question has a number of answers. Into the equation enter:

- Ideological differences between the pagan Greco-Roman world and the monotheistic Jewish world
- The Jewish response to the Roman domination which led to strife among the various Jewish factions: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Zealots
- Roman persecution of Jews which started with taxation and ended with outright slaughter

We will look at them one by one.

## **IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES**

Like the Greeks, the Romans worshipped many gods. Not only that, whenever they conquered a swath of land, they simply added the conquered peoples' gods to the Roman pantheon. The Roman historian Vero writes that by the 1st century BCE they had in excess of 30,000 gods.

The Jewish idea of one invisible God, who demanded exclusive worship and could not be added to the big pot, was totally incomprehensible to the Romans.

**The Jewish idea of one invisible God who could not be added to the big pot was incomprehensible to the Romans.**

But more importantly, along with Jewish beliefs went a lifestyle of obedience to a host of commandments that countered the Roman worldview. For example, the Jewish insistence on respect for life, was bound to irk a people who built amphitheaters just so the public could be amused by watching their fellow human beings be butchered, the more grotesquely the better. (See [Part 30](#).)

The Talmud (in Megillah 6a) captures the difference in a very interesting statement:

Caesarea and Jerusalem: if someone will tell you, "both are destroyed," do not believe it; if someone will tell you, "both are standing," do not believe it. But if someone will tell you, "Caesarea is destroyed and Jerusalem is standing," or "Jerusalem is destroyed and Caesarea is standing" that you can believe.

Now we know for a historical fact that Caesarea and Jerusalem were standing at the same time. When Herod was alive, he built the city of Caesarea, and for sure he didn't destroy Jerusalem.

So what does this mean?

In making this statement the rabbis were making a theological, historical, and political point about the reality of the relationship between Israel and Rome, between the descendants of Jacob and the descendants of Esau.

What they meant is that in terms of the cosmic struggle one can't be on top without the other being down. When the Jews are up and Jewish values are strong, then Roman values are going to be down and so on. That's the cosmic struggle for the soul of humanity.

## **JEWISH STRIFE**

The Jewish reaction to the presence of the Romans - who were dominating the Holy Land and worshipping idols - had many faces.

- Hellenized and assimilated Jews. They welcomed the Roman presence and profited by it. They were angry with other Jews who resisted Roman domination.
- The Sadducees. For the most part, these were wealthy Jews who denied the Divine origin of the Oral Law. They dominated (and corrupted) the Temple hierarchy, and were willing to cooperate with the Romans to keep their power base. They saw other Jewish factions as troublemakers.
- The Pharisees. These were mainstream Jews who wanted nothing to do with the Romans, but they were pragmatic. They wanted Judaism to survive and short of giving up their religious principles were willing to make the best of the Roman domination. They disapproved of the other Jewish factions - those that tried to curry favor with the Romans and those that advocated open rebellion.

- The Zealots. They were comprised of several different groups of nationalistic extremists. They were incensed at the Roman presence and were angry with other Jews whom they saw as actively or tacitly cooperating with the Romans.
- The Sicarii (meaning "dagger.") This was the criminal element often masquerading under the guise of nationalism. They sided with the Zealots.
- Splinter sects. These religious groups (such as the Essenes) held extreme views and opposed both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. For example, the Dead Sea Sect (famed for the Dead Sea Scrolls) expected the world to end shortly and went off to live in the desert to escape the depravity and corruption of city life and to prepare for the End of Days.

Jewish sources list 24 separate factions. Their conflicting views were a symptom of a disease afflicting the Jewish people at this time. The rabbis call this disease *sinat chinam* -- "senseless hatred" of one Jew for another Jew.

Unfortunately, we are seeing a very similar situation today. You don't need to be a scholar of political science to realize that by far the biggest problem in the Land of Israel, and the Jewish world as a whole, is the hatred the Jews have for each other. There are factions of Ashkenazim, Sephardim, secular, religious; among the religious there are the Hassidim, the Mitnagdim, and the religious Zionists. A weakened, disunited Jewish nation is easy prey for the both anti-Semites and the enemies of Israel.

The paradigm for all that is happening today can be found in the Roman era.

## ROMAN PERSECUTION

Adding fuel to the ideological fire was the way the Romans tried to extract money - by taxation and sometimes outright looting -- from the local population. This was especially true of several of the governors (procurators) of Judea who were exceptionally cruel and avaricious.

Historian Paul Johnson in his *History of the Jews* (p. 136) explains why this proved a particularly incendiary element in the conflict:

The Hellenized gentiles ... [who] constituted the local civil service and the tax collectors ... were notorious in their anti-semitism ... Foolishly, Rome insisted on drawing its Judaeian procurators from Greek-speaking gentile areas - the last and most insensitive of them, Gessius Florus came from Greek Asia Minor."

Florus persuaded Nero to strip the Jews of Caesarea of their citizenship, making them effectively aliens in the city and totally at the mercy of the Greco-Roman population. The Jews revolted, and their protest was viciously put down with many people killed and synagogues desecrated. The pogrom spread to other cities where the Hellenized population seized the opportunity to get rid of the Jews - Jewish homes were invaded, looted and burned down.

Jewish refugees, vowing vengeance, began to stream into Jerusalem.

**Roman soldiers  
massacred more  
than 3,600 Jews.**

But Florus only escalated the conflict, first by giving Roman soldiers free rein to massacre more than 3,600 Jews who had jeered him, and then by arresting Jewish elders, having them publicly flogged and crucified. (See Josephus, *Jewish War*, p. 152)

Now there was no turning back. The Jews took up arms.

To go up against the might of the Roman Empire was nothing short of suicidal, and indeed, the Jewish War would end in great tragedy. But when it began in 66 CE, it had some astonishing successes with Florus fleeing from Jerusalem for his life and the Roman garrison isolated and overwhelmed.

But such insults to its might Rome could not abide. Jewish historian, Rabbi Berel Wein in his *Echoes of Glory* (p. 155) relates graphically what happened next:

The success of the Jews in driving Rome from Jerusalem sent shock waves throughout the Roman Empire. It also unleashed a wave of bloody pogroms against Jews, especially in Caesarea, Alexandria and Damascus. Thousands of Jews were slaughtered in these riots, and thousands more were sold into the slave markets of Rome.

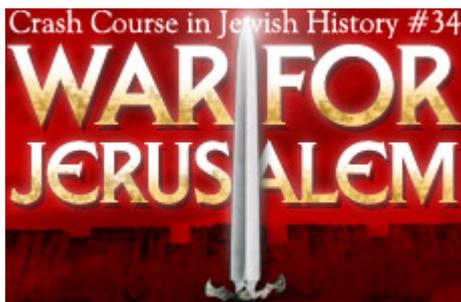
The sages and rabbis advised a reconciliation with the Romans, seeing that, if irritated any further, Rome would retaliate with even greater force and then surely destroy the whole country and decimate the Jewish people.

Considering that the Sadducees were already pro-Rome and the Pharisees held generally moderate views, their wisdom might have prevailed. But the Zealot extremists would have none of it.

Vowing to fight to the death, they went up against a new Roman contingent making its way toward Jerusalem and slayed 6,000 Romans soldiers. Coincidentally, the victory was won on the very same spot where the Maccabees had vanquished the Greeks, and the Zealots -- seeing a Divine hand helping them -- were encouraged further.

The Roman answer was to dispatch four legions under the empire's most experienced commander, Vespasian.

Vespasian's strategy was to subdue conflict throughout the region first, and then to take the final prize - Jerusalem.



**The Jewish nation fights to the death to save its spiritual center.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In response to the revolt of the Jews, in 67 CE Rome sends out the empire's most experienced commander, Vespasian, at the head of four legions. This is a massive force. Each legion has 6,000 fighting men plus an equal number of auxiliaries for a total of nearly 50,000 Roman soldiers.

(One of these four legions, the 10th is the most famous. It is commanded by Vespasian's own son, Titus, and has a boar as its symbol.)

The Roman goal: the annihilation of those Jews who dared to rise against Rome and who have heretofore (unbelievably) succeeded.

Shrewdly, Vespasian begins his campaign in the north. Any city or town that resists his advance is utterly destroyed, its population slaughtered or taken into slavery, the women raped, property pillaged. Then, the surrounding area is denuded of trees and the fields strewn with salt to ensure that nothing would grow there again.

While always brutal in warfare, the Romans surpass themselves when it comes to the Jews. Their aim is to send a message throughout the Empire: any resistance against Rome will end in total and complete devastation.

Vespasian hopes that by the time he turns to Jerusalem, the Jews will have seen that resistance is futile and have surrendered.

But, even with four legions, Vespasian has a tough fight on his hands.

## JOSEPHUS

One of the first to resist is the fortress of Jotapata, built on the slopes of Mount Atzmon. Here the commander of the Jewish forces in the Galilee, Yosef ben Mattityahu -- better known to us as Josephus Flavius -- makes a heroic stand, but cannot withstand the Roman onslaught.

When defeat seems certain, the Zealots of the group decide that it is better to die at their own hands than to be sold into slavery or to watch their families be mercilessly butchered by the Romans.

**The Zealots of the group decide that it is better to die at their own hands than to be sold into slavery.** Thus, they make a pact to kill their own wives and children and then themselves. Josephus is one of the few survivors; rather than kill himself, he surrenders to the Romans.

Vespasian realizes immediately that Josephus could be useful to the Romans and employs him as guide/translator and later as a chronicler of the war.

Josephus' works have survived to this day. Among the foremost are *Antiquities* and *The Jewish War*, the story of all of the events taking place before, during, and after the Great Revolt, from 66 CE to 70 CE.

His account is unique as far as historical accounts go, because he is an eyewitness to many things he writes about. (He differs in this regard from other Roman historians, like Deo Cassius, who lived later and merely repeated what they've read in official records.)

Of course, Josephus has his own slant on things. For example, he is writing for the Romans, (which is probably why his works have survived intact), yet he has been loyal to Judaism his whole life. So he seems to be trying to please everyone at the same time, and you have to read him very cautiously and very critically.

However, one thing that even his critics agree upon is that he is very accurate concerning the physical descriptions of places and structures in the Land of Israel. Archeology has verified many of his accounts.

## **GAMLA**

All during the summer and autumn of 67 CE Vespasian marches through northern Israel suppressing Jewish resistance. Some surrender without a fight - like Tiberias, for example. Some fight to the end.

One of the most heroic stories concerns the city of Gamla in the Golan Heights.

**One of the most heroic stories concerns the city of Gamla in the Golan Heights.** Partially excavated and the center of a beautiful nature reserve, Gamla is a must-see spot in Israel today. This site is unusual, because unlike most cities in Israel that were destroyed, Gamla was never re-built by anyone and is therefore considered to be one of the best-preserved Roman battle sites in the world. The excavations show the city exactly like it looked on the day of its destruction in 67 CE.

(Gamla stood covered by the sands of time for exactly 1900 years until Israel won back the Golan Heights in 1967.)

Anticipating the Roman advance, the citizens of Gamla minted coins with the imprint "To the Redemption of Jerusalem, the Holy." They believed that on the outcome of their resistance rested the future of Jerusalem. Sadly, they were right.

The Romans totally annihilated Gamla killing some 4,000 Jews. The remaining 5,000 inhabitants, rather than waiting to be brutally slaughtered by the Romans, jumped to their deaths off the cliffs surrounding the city. (This is why Gamla is called the Masada of the north; we will discuss Masada in the next installment.)

## **JERUSALEM**

In the summer of 70 CE, the Romans finally work their way to Jerusalem. They surround the city and lay siege to it.

The Romans know that if they can destroy Jerusalem, they will destroy the Jewish people, because Jerusalem is the center of their spiritual life.

Before the Great Revolt began, Jerusalem had somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 inhabitants, but now, with refugees from other places flocking in, the population is two to three times its normal size. It is concentrated in two enclaves:

1. the Lower City, south of the Temple Mount (this section of Jerusalem is today outside the current city walls; today it is called the City of David or Silwan in Arabic)
2. the Upper City, west of the Temple Mount, inhabited by the wealthier folks and the priestly class (excavations of this part of the city can be seen in the underground Wohl Museum)

The city is massively fortified. It also has huge storehouses of food. It has a good water supply. Jerusalem can hold back the Romans for a long time.

So it seems like the Romans are in a very bad situation. They are trying to besiege one of the largest cities in the ancient world which is remarkably well fortified, which has a huge amount of food and water and a lot of determined people who are not afraid to die.

Jerusalem could have gone down in history as the only city that the Romans couldn't take by laying siege. But it didn't.

The reason that it did not was *sinat chinam*, "senseless hatred among the Jews."

## CIVIL WAR

While the Romans are besieging the city on the outside, the Jews are waging a civil war inside.

Forces of the various factions are occupying various parts of the city. Most importantly, the Sicarii and the Zealots, led by Yochanan of Gush Chalav, have control of the Temple Mount. The unholy alliance of Sadducees and Pharisees makes up the bulk of the moderate forces which rule the rest of the city.

**The Zealots bring in non-Jewish mercenaries, who slaughter the moderate Jews.**

When the moderates attempt to remove the extremists from the Temple Mount, Yochanan of Gush Chalav brings in non-Jewish mercenaries, the Idumeans, who slaughter the moderate Jews.

As if that is not enough, the Zealots destroy the great storehouses of food so that the people would have no choice but to fight or starve.

With the food storehouses destroyed, famine breaks out in the city and desperate people try and sneak outside the walls to forage for food. Anyone that is caught by the Romans is immediately put to death via the standard Roman form of execution - crucifixion. So many die that the city is surrounded by thousands of crucified Jews.

Meanwhile, the Romans continue their systematic destructions of the city's defenses, layer by layer.

What happens next?

## YOCHANAN BEN ZAKKAI

The leader of the Pharisees, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, sees that Jerusalem cannot hold out. It's too late. But the Zealots are bent on continuing their suicidal fight. So he formulates a plan.

At this time the Zealots are not allowing anyone to leave the city (as if anyone wanted to flee to be crucified), except for burials. In a desperate bid to try and salvage something from the impending disaster, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai has himself put in a casket and taken to Vespasian.

He greets Vespasian as if he were the emperor, to which Vespasian replies that he ought to be executed for his remark. Not exactly a friendly welcome. But Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai persists, telling Vespasian that God would allow only a great ruler to take Jerusalem.

**Rabbi Yochanan  
ben Zakkai tells  
Vespasian that  
God would allow  
only a great ruler  
to take  
Jerusalem.**

Just then, a messenger arrives from Rome with a message for Vespasian: "Rise, because Caesar has died and the prominent men of Rome have decided to seek you as their head. They have made you Caesar."

Impressed with Rabbi Yochanan's ability to predict the future, Vespasian asks him to name a wish.

Rabbi Yochanan asks to save Torah.

Vespasian gives Rabbi Yochanan a safe escort for the Torah sages of the day to leave Jerusalem and to convene a Sanhedrin at Yavneh.

Could Rabbi Yochanan have asked Vespasian to spare Jerusalem?

Not likely. By then, the Romans had to prove a point. They would not have spared Jerusalem. But Rabbi Yochanan's quick thinking spared Judaism.

The Jewish people can always survive physical destruction. The much bigger danger is spiritual destruction.

Because the Romans granted Rabbi Yochanan's wish, the sages survived, the chain of transmission survived, and the Jewish people survived.

Meanwhile, now that Vespasian is emperor, he must return to Rome. He turns the siege over to his son Titus and tells him to finish the job.



**On the saddest day in the  
Jewish calendar, the 9th of  
Av, the Temple burns to  
the ground.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

We left off the story in the last installment with Vespasian being made Caesar and returning to Rome. His son Titus now takes over the siege of Jerusalem.

Titus attacks just after Passover in the year 70 CE, battering the city with his catapults which propel a rain of stone, iron and fire onto the population. By then, the city defenders are weakened from hunger and perhaps even more so from internal strife. Even so, it takes Titus two months of intense fighting before he is able to breach the walls of the city.

**After two months  
of fighting, Titus**

**breaches the walls of the city.** The date for this event is 17th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz. To this day, religious Jews fast on the 17th of Tammuz in commemoration of this event.

Roman historian, Deo Cassius, reports:

"Though a breach was made in the wall by means of engines, nevertheless the capture of the place did not immediately follow even then. On the contrary, the defenders killed great numbers [of Romans] who tried to crowd through the opening and they also set fire to some of the buildings nearby, hoping thus to check the further progress of the Romans. Nevertheless, the soldiers, because of their superstition, did not immediately rush in but at last, under compulsion from Titus, they made their way inside. Then the Jews defended themselves much more vigorously than before, as if they had discovered a piece of rare good fortune in being able to fight near the Temple and fall in its defense."

A horrific slaughter ensues with the Romans taking the city, literally house-by-house. One of the excavations that testifies to the destruction is the famous "Burnt House" which is open to visitors in Old City Jerusalem today. Here the skeletal remains of a woman's arm were found where she died on the doorstep of her house, a spear still in her death grip.

It takes him three weeks, but Titus slowly works his way to the Temple Mount. Now a duel to the death ensues, and finally, four months after the Romans had begun this attack Titus orders the Second Temple razed to the ground. The day is the 9th of Av, the very same day on which the First Temple was destroyed.

Deo Cassius again:

"The populace was stationed below in the court and the elders on the steps and the priests in the Sanctuary itself. And though they were but a handful fighting against a far superior force, they were not conquered until part of the Temple was set on fire. Then they met their death willingly, some throwing themselves on the swords of the Romans, some slaying one another, others taking their own lives and still others leaping into the flames. And it seemed to everybody and especially to them that so far from being destruction, it was victory and salvation and happiness to them that they perished along with the Temple."

All of the neighboring countryside is denuded of whatever trees remained from the siege to create the giant bonfire to burn the buildings of the Temple to the ground. The intense heat from the fire causes the moisture in the limestone to expand and it explodes like popcorn, producing a chain reaction of destruction. In a day's time, the magnificent Temple is nothing but rubble.

## **HISTORY AS DESTINY**

The destruction of the Second Temple is one of the most important events in the history of the Jewish people, and certainly one of the most depressing.

It is a sign that God has withdrawn from (though certainly not abandoned) the Jews. Although the Jews will survive -- in accordance with the promise that they will be an "eternal nation" - the special relationship with God they enjoyed while the Temple stood is gone.

**Jewish future;** Sadly, this period of time, perhaps more than any other reflects the maxim that  
**Jewish history is** Jewish past is Jewish future, that Jewish history is Jewish destiny.  
**Jewish destiny.**

There's no period of time that more closely reflects what is going on today in Israel and among the Jewish people worldwide. ([See Part 33](#)). We are still living in the consequences of the destruction of the Second Temple, spiritually and physically. And the same problems we had then are the same problems we have now.

States the Talmud (in Yomah): "Why was the Second Temple destroyed? Because of *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred of one Jew for another."

What is the antidote to this problem which is so rampant in the Jewish world today? The answer is ahavat chinam, the Jews have to learn to love their fellow Jews.

There's no hope for the Jewish people until all learn how to communicate with each other, and respect each other, regardless of differences.

God has no patience for Jews fighting each other. It's extremely important to study this period of time carefully because there are many valuable lessons that we can learn about the pitfalls that need to be avoided.

## "JUDEA CAPTURED"

Before setting fire to the Temple, the Romans removed anything of value. Then they harnessed a group of Jewish slaves to take these priceless artifacts to Rome. Their arrival in Rome is memorialized in engravings of the Arch of Titus, still standing there today near the Forum.

It was the tradition in the Roman Jewish community that Jews would never walk under that arch. On the night of May 14, 1948, when Israel was declared a state, the Jews of Rome had a triumphant parade and marched under the arch. Their message: "Rome is gone, we're still around. Victory is ours."

But at the time it was a horrible disaster. Hundreds of thousands of people died, many more were enslaved. There were so many Jews flooding the slave market after the Great Revolt that you could buy a Jewish slave for less than the price of a horse. Israel was in despair.

## MASADA

Jerusalem has been conquered, the Temple has been destroyed, but it was not over yet.

A group of about 1,000 Zealots escaped and made their way into the desert where they holed up in the great fortress on top of a mountain plateau called Masada.

Masada was built by Herod, the Great, as a place of refuge for him. As such it was practically self-sufficient. With its own water collection system and storage houses that could feed an army for years. What's more, the fortress was practically inaccessible from below and easy to defend.

Indeed, the Zealots manage to survive there for three years.

If you go visit the ruins of Masada, you will see the remains of the fortress as well as the ramp that the Romans built, using Jewish slave labor, in order to capture Masada.

**The Zealots killed their own families, then each other until the last man committed suicide.**

Josephus reports on the capture of Masada in 73 CE and the narrative resembles in some way the capture of Gamla. Here, too, the Zealots killed their own families, then each other until finally, there was only one man left, and he committed suicide.

For the modern state of Israel, Masada is a symbol of Jews who chose to die as free men rather than be enslaved or executed by the Romans, and is held up as a Zionist ideal. Up until recently, Israeli soldiers would go up to Masada to be sworn in, and call out for the mountain to hear and echo back: "Masada will never fall again!" (We will discuss this in greater detail in future installments on modern Zionist history.)

Back in 73 CE when Masada, the last Jewish stronghold, fell, the Romans could finally declare an end to the revolt.

Congratulating themselves on asserting the Roman might against the defiant Jews, the Romans also minted coins depicting a weeping woman and proclaiming *Judea Capta*, "Judea Captured."

But was it?

## **JEWISH SURVIVAL**

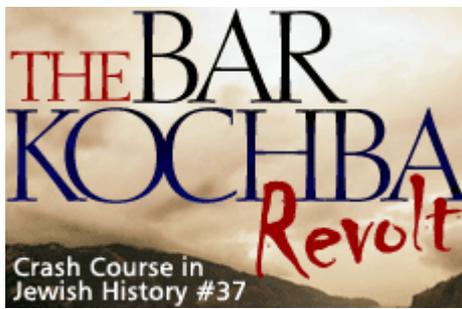
The land was no longer under Jewish control, but it had not been since the days of Hasmoneans anyway. True, the Temple, the center of Jewish worship and the symbol of Judaism's special connection to the one God, was gone. But Judaism - along with all its unique value system -- was alive and well.

Thanks to the foresight of Rabbi Yachanan ben Zakkai, the center of Torah learning at Yavneh thrived. It was here that the rabbis put together the legal/spiritual infrastructure which would allow the Jewish people to survive without many of the normative institutions which were the backbone of Judaism: Temple and its service, the High Priesthood, the monarchy. It was here that the rabbis institutionalized public prayer as a replacement for the Temple service and made the synagogue the center of Jewish communal life.

But most importantly, it was here that the rabbis devised a way of making sure that Judaism lived on in every Jewish home. In the coming years, when the Jews would be dispersed the world over - doomed for two thousand years to have no common land, no centralized leadership, and aside from Hebrew scriptures, no common language - they would carry with them their Judaism undiminished.

But that was yet to come.

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**Despite the disastrous results of the Great Revolt, the Jews revolt again and again.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The Temple was no more. Jerusalem had been conquered. Rome had asserted its might and crushed the Great Revolt of the Jews. Now there could be quiet.

Hardly.

Virulent anti-Semitism continued unabated in the Roman Empire, generated by the Hellenists who, not happy to leave well enough alone, seemed determined to pour salt onto Jewish wounds.

(This same need for overkill would be exhibited by later enemies of the Jews, who, having exterminated entire Jewish communities, and having no more Jews left to slaughter, would then go on to desecrate Jewish cemeteries and mutilate Jewish corpses.)

The level of hostility and mistreatment of the Jews escalated throughout the Roman Empire to the extent of becoming unbearable.

In response, the Jews revolted several times more. Each time thousands of their number were killed. As a result, the average Roman looked at every Jew as a person hostile to Rome. Jews were officially designated as having "enemy status" -- *deditici* in Latin.

**Jews were officially designated as having "enemy status."** Of course, the Jews in the Land of Israel had been crushed in the Great Revolt, and -- at least, right after the destruction of the Temple -- did not have the strength to fight. But we must remember that at this time, a considerable number of Jews were living outside Israel. In fact, historians estimate that there were about 6-7 million Jews living in the Roman Empire and at least 60% of that number were living outside the land of Israel. Places like Alexandria, Egypt (one of the most cosmopolitan cities of that era) alone had a Jewish population of about 250,000 and boasted the largest synagogue in the world.

These Diaspora Jews (and eventually those living in Judah as well) rose in revolt, encouraged by blows dealt the Romans by the Parthians in 116 CE during the reign of Trajan.

The Roman response, with the help of anti-Semites of the region, was to slaughter the Jews. Now it must be noted that while the Romans could be absolutely vicious and brutal in the heat of battle, they did not embark on any kind of policy to exterminate the Jewish people. That's something that you only see with Hitler and the Nazis in the 20th century. (In fact, the term "genocide" did not enter the English language until 1940-1945.)

At the time, it wasn't seen as in the Roman interest to attempt a total massacre of the Jews. It would not have sat well with other conquered peoples, who might think they were next and who might rebel. The Romans were very practical people and this is not something they wanted.

## HADRIAN

When Hadrian took the reigns of power in 117 CE, he inaugurated - at least at first - an atmosphere of tolerance. He even talked of allowing the Jews to rebuilt the Temple, a proposal that was met with virulent opposition from the Hellenists.

Why Hadrian changed his attitude to one of outright hostility toward the Jews remains a puzzle, but historian Paul Johnson in his *History of the Jews* speculates that he fell under the influence of the Roman historian Tacitus, who was then busy disseminating Greek smears against the Jews.

**Roman historian Tacitus was then busy disseminating Greek smears against the Jews.** Tacitus and his circle were part of a group of Roman intellectuals who viewed themselves as inheritors of Greek culture. (Some Roman nobles actually considered themselves the literal descendants of the Greeks, though there is no historical basis for this myth.) It was fashionable among this group to take on all the trappings of Greek culture. Hating the Jews as representing the anti-thesis of Hellenism went with the territory. (For more on the subject of Judaism vs. Hellenism, see [Part 28](#) and [Part 33](#).)

Thus influenced, Hadrian decided to spin around 180 degrees. Instead of letting the Jews rebuild, Hadrian formulated a plan to transform Jerusalem into a pagan city-state on the Greek *polis* model with a shrine to Jupiter on the site of the Jewish Temple.

Nothing could be worse in Jewish eyes than to take the holiest spot in the Jewish world and to put a temple to a Roman god on it. This was the ultimate affront.

## BAR KOCHBA

Jewish outrage at his actions led to one of the single greatest revolts of the Roman Era. Simon Bar Kosiba led the uprising, which began in full force in 132 CE.

For many years, historians did not write very much about Simon Bar Kosiba. But then, archeologists discovered some of his letters in Nahal Hever near the Dead Sea. If you go to the Israel Museum you can see these letters and they are absolutely fascinating. Some of them pertain to religious observance, because his army was a totally religious army. But they also contain a tremendous amount of historical facts. We learn that the Jews participating in the revolt were hiding out in caves. (These caves have also been found - full of belongings of Bar Kosiba's people. The belongings - pottery, shoes, etc. - are on display in the Israel Museum, and the caves, though bare, are open to tourists.)

From the letters and other historical data, we learn that in 132 CE, Bar Kosiba organized a large guerilla army and succeeded in actually throwing the Romans out of Jerusalem and Israel and establishing, albeit for a very brief period, an independent Jewish state.

Bar Kosiba's success caused many to believe -- among them Rabbi Akiva, one of the wisest and holiest of Israel's rabbis -- that he was the Messiah. He was nicknamed "Bar Kochba" or "Son of Star," an allusion to a verse in the Book of Numbers (24:17): "there shall come a star out of Jacob." This star is understood to refer to the Messiah.

Bar Kochba did not turn out to be the Messiah, and later the rabbis wrote that his real name was Bar Kosiva meaning "Son of a Lie" -- highlighting the fact that he was a false Messiah.

**Bar Kochba managed to unite the entire Jewish people around him.**

At the time, however, Bar Kochba - who was a man of tremendous leadership abilities - managed to unite the entire Jewish people around him. Jewish accounts describe him as a man of tremendous physical strength, who could uproot a tree while riding on a horse. This is probably an exaggeration, but he was a very special leader and undoubtedly had messianic potential, which is what Rabbi Akiva recognized in him.

Jewish sources list Bar Kochba's army at 100,000 men, but even if that is an overestimate and he had half that number, it was still a huge force (equal to four

Roman legions).

United, the Jews were a force to be reckoned with. They overran the Romans, threw them out of the land of Israel, declared independence and even minted coins. That is a pretty unique event in the history of the Roman Empire.

## **ROMAN RESPONSE**

Rome could not let this be. Such boldness had to be crushed and those responsible punished -- brutally and totally.

But the Jews were not easily overcome. Hadrian poured more and more troops into Israel to fight the Bar Kochba forces until the Romans had enlisted almost half of their entire army, a full twelve legions in Israel (three times as many as they had sent in to crush the Great Revolt 65 years earlier).

Heading this mammoth force was Rome's best general, Julius Severus. But even with all this might behind him, Julius Severus was afraid to meet the Jews in open battle. This fact alone is very telling, because the Romans were the masters of open battle. But they feared the Jews because they saw them as being willing to die for their faith - a mentality the Romans thought suicidal. So what happened?

The Roman historian Dio Cassius tells us:

"Severus did not venture to attack his opponents in the open at any one point in view of their numbers and their desperation, but by intercepting small groups. Thanks to the numbers of soldiers and his officers, and by depriving them of food and shutting them up, he was able -- rather slowly to be sure, but with comparatively little danger -- to crush, exhaust and exterminate them. Very few of them in fact survived. Fifty of their most important outposts and 985 of their most famous villages were razed to the ground, and 580,000 men were slain in various raids and battles, and the number of those who perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out.

"Thus nearly the whole of Judea was made desolate, a result of which the people had had forewarning before the war. For the tomb of Solomon, which the Jews regarded as an object of veneration, fell to pieces of itself and collapsed. And many wolves and hyenas rushed howling into the cities. Many Romans, however, perished in this war. Therefore, Hadrian, in writing to the Senate, did not employ the opening phrase commonly affected by emperors: 'If you and your children are in health it is well and I and my legions are in health.'"

This account of Deo Cassius - even if he is exaggerating the numbers - is very interesting. He tells us that the revolt was very bloody and very costly.

Indeed, the Romans lost an entire legion in battle. The 22nd Roman legion walked into an ambush and was slaughtered. By the end of the revolt the Romans had to bring virtually half the army of the entire Roman Empire into Israel to crush the Jews.

## WHY DID THE JEWS LOSE?

Apparently the Jews came very close to winning the war. Indeed, they did win for a time. Why did they lose in the end? The sages say they lost because they were too arrogant. Having tasted victory they adopted the attitude of *kochi v'otsem yadea asiti et ha chayal hazeh*, "by my strength and my valor I did this."

**Bar Kochba became arrogant. He saw himself winning. He heard people calling him the Messiah.**

Bar Kochba too became arrogant. He saw himself winning. He heard people calling him the Messiah. Certainly, if Rabbi Akiva thought so, then he had the potential to be Israel's Ultimate Leader. But all this adulation went to his head, and he began to lose battles.

In Judaism we are taught that while people must make the effort, it is God that wins the wars. It is not human strength nor human might that's doing it.

## THE FALL OF BETAR

Bar Kochba made his final stand in the city of Betar, which is to the southwest of Jerusalem. You can go visit it today, though ancient Betar has not been excavated. The Talmud (in Gittin 57a) relates what happened in Betar:

"They had the custom in Betar that when a baby boy was born they planted a cedar tree and for a baby girl they planted a pine tree, and when they would marry they would cut them down and make a marriage canopy of the branches. One day the daughter of Caesar was passing and the shaft of her litter broke. They cut down a cedar and brought it to her. The Jews of Betar fell upon them and beat them. They reported to Caesar that the Jews were rebelling and marched against them ... they killed [Jewish] men, women and children until their blood flowed into the Mediterranean Sea ... It was taught that for seven years the gentiles cultivated their vineyards with the blood of Israel without requiring manure for fertilization."

The city fell on the saddest day in the Jewish calendar -- the 9th of Av of the year 135, the same day as both the First and the Second Temple fell.

The Romans, in their fury, did not want to allow the Jewish bodies to be buried; they wanted to leave them out in the open to rot. According to tradition, the bodies lay in the open for months but did not rot. Today,

when Jews say the Grace after Meals, *Birkat HaMazon*, they add a special blessing (*ha tov u'mativ*) as a way of thanking God for this act of mercy in Betar.

Exhausted, the Romans have had enough of the Jews who had caused them more manpower and material losses than any other people in the history of Empire. At the end of the Bar Kochba revolt, Hadrian decided that the way not to have another one is to cut off the Jews from connection to their beloved land.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The Romans sought to extinguish Jewish presence in Jerusalem by renaming it Aelia Capitolina, and by changing Israel to Palestine.**

No people had revolted more or caused the Romans greater manpower or material losses than the Jews. But they had done so at a great price to themselves as well.

The Roman historian Dio Cassius writes that over half a million Jews died in the fighting. Even if this figure is exaggerated, there is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Jews did die and the country was laid low.

The Jewish challenge to Rome that had begun in 66 CE had lasted almost 70 years. How such a comparatively tiny group could take on the might of Rome over and over again and for so long is hard to fathom. But perhaps the answer lies in the reason behind the conflict.

It was not so much a fight over territory or property, as it was a fight over the very way of life. Monotheism and the laws of the Torah were so deeply ingrained in the Jews that any attempt to separate the people from the essence of Judaism was seen as the death of the very soul of the nation.

The Jews found reserves in themselves beyond normal human boundaries, like a mother who is capable of superhuman feats of strength to defend the life of her child.

**Their solution: separate the Jews from their land.**

In the end the Jews were crushed. And the Romans did everything in their power to make sure that they would stay crushed. They wanted to make sure that no Jew was ever in a position to rally his brethren again.

Their solution: separate the Jews from their land.

## **AELIA CAPITOLINA**

As part of this policy of erasing the Jewish presence from Israel, Hadrian leveled Jerusalem and on top of the rubble rebuilt the pagan city he had planned, which he named Aelia Capitolina.

Through the heart of the city, he built a columned esplanade called the Cardo.

(Today, the excavated Cardo in the Old City of Jerusalem stands as a reminder of that time. Cardo means "heart" in English, and is related to the medical term "cardiac arrest." Tour guides are fond of pointing out that if Hadrian were alive today, he'd have cardiac arrest to see all the Jewish shops in his Cardo today, with Jerusalem and Israel alive and well.)

Whatever Jews remained in the area were strictly forbidden to enter Aelia Capitolina. The only day that Jews were permitted to enter the city was the 9th of Av, so that they could be reminded of their greatest disaster and weep over the ruins of the Temple, of which nothing remained, save some of the retaining walls surrounding the Temple Mount. (The Kotel -- a section of the Western Wall that was dubbed the "Wailing Wall" -- was the only piece of those retaining walls that Jews could access for hundreds of years. And this is where they came and wept and prayed.)

For the first time since King David made it Israel's capital a thousand years earlier, Jerusalem was empty of Jews. It's ironic that the first city in history to be made intentionally and completely *Juden rein*, "Jew free," (to borrow a term later used by the Nazis) was their very own Jerusalem.

But that was not all.

To further squelch any nationalistic feeling, Hadrian renamed the land *Philistia* (Palestine) after the Phillistines, an extinct people who once occupied the Mediterranean coastal area and who were some of the bitterest enemies of the Jews described in the Bible.

This name survived in Christian writings, to be resurrected in 1917, after World War I, when the British took over the Middle East, having conquered the Ottoman Empire. They named the lands east and west of the Jordan River - including the country of Jordan which the British created in 1923 -- the Palestine Mandate. It is from this time that the Arabs living in this area get the name Palestinians. (Of course, at that time the Jews living in the Palestine Mandate were called Palestinians too.)

## **RABBI AKIVA**

The Roman plan sought not only to separate Jews from the land of Israel, it also sought to separate them from Judaism.

Writes historian Rabbi Berel Wein in his *Echoes of Glory* (p. 217):

"Their [Roman] plan was to eliminate the scholars and sages of Israel, who were, after all, the true leaders of the Jews, and to forbid the practice of Judaism, the lifeblood of Israel, thus guaranteeing the Jews' demise as a counter-force to Roman culture and hegemony. The Sabbath, circumcision, public study and teaching of Torah, as well as observances of all Jewish ritual and customs, were forbidden."

One of the great rabbis of the time who simply refused to abide by these decrees was Rabbi Akiva. Although many rabbis did likewise and were killed by the Romans for their acts of disobedience, Rabbi Akiva deserves special mention because of his stature in the Jewish world and the particular way he met his death.

It is fascinating to note that Rabbi Akiva did not even begin to study Torah until age 40. Until that time he had been an uneducated shepherd. But then he fell in love, and his beloved Rachel said she would marry

him only if he studied Torah. At first he thought the task impossible, but then he saw a stone that had been hollowed out by dripping water. He said: "If water, which is soft, can hollow out a stone, which is hard, how much more would the words of the Torah, which are hard, be able to cut through and make an impression on my heart, which is soft."

**Rabbi Akiva began Torah studies at age 40 and in a short period of time became one of the wisest men of Israel.**

Thus he began his studies and in a short period of time was considered one of the wisest men of Israel. Students from all over flocked to learn from him, and at one point, he was reported to head a chain of schools totaling 24,000 students.

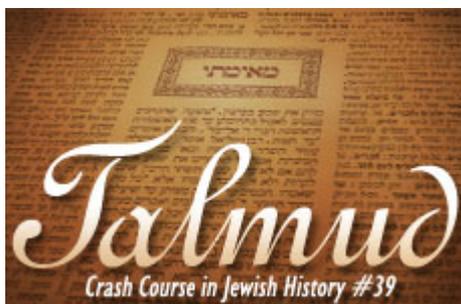
The Talmud abounds with stories about Rabbi Akiva. One of the most famous is the story of four great sages who entered *pardes*, the "orchard" -- that is they engaged in mystical meditative techniques and ascended into realms of Divine consciousness. Of the four, three met terrible fates as a result of their mystical foray -- one died, another went insane, and the third became a heretic. Only Rabbi Akiva "entered in peace and emerged in peace."

A person like Rabbi Akiva, who lived on such a high spiritual level and who possessed an uncompromising dedication to Torah, could not be silenced by Roman decrees.

When the Romans learned that Rabbi Akiva was openly teaching Torah they decided to make a public example of his punishment.

They arrested him and took him to the hippodrome in Caesarea where on (or around) Yom Kippur in 136 CE, they staged a prolonged torture of the great sage. This horrible spectacle included having Rabbi Akiva's skin flayed with iron combs.

Rabbi Akiva went to his death, sanctifying God's name, with the words of the *Shema* on his lips: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Rabbi Akiva's spirit exemplified the spirit of the sages who against the greatest odds sought to keep Judaism alive. We shall see next how they succeeded.



**In a time of chaos, the rabbis decide that they must do the unprecedented -- write down the Oral Law.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

At various times during the Hadrian persecutions, the sages were forced into hiding, though they managed to reconvene at Usha in 122 CE, and then in a time of quiet managed to re-establish again at Yavneh in 158 CE.

With so much persecution and unrest, with the Jewish people fleeing the land of Israel, the rabbis knew that they would not be able to keep a central seat of rabbinic power alive for long.

Yet, during these great periods of chaos, some of the finest rabbinic minds made their mark. Among them:

- Rabbi Akiva (whom we discussed in [Part 38](#))
- Rabbi Akiva's chief disciple, Rabbi Meir, also the husband of the legendary Bruriah
- Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the author of the *Zohar*, the central text of the Kabbalah
- Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's son, Rabbi Eliezer
- Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel II, the descendant of the House of Hillel and a direct descendant of King David

## YEHUDAH HA NASI

Now, another man was to emerge and make his mark -- the son of Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel II -- Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (in English "Judah, the Prince").

In a time of chaos, the rabbis decide that they must do the unprecedented -- write down the Oral Law.

He is one personality who is absolutely fundamental to understanding this period of time, and one of the greatest personalities of Jewish history.

So great was he that he is now affectionately referred to in Jewish scholarship as only *Rebbe*.

**So great was  
Yehudah HaNasi  
that he is now  
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only *Rebbe*.**

He had a unique combination of attributes -- being both a great Torah scholar and a strong leader -- that gave him the power to lead the Jewish people at this chaotic time. He was also a man of tremendous personal wealth, which put him in a position to wheel and deal and do what needed to get done, not just with the Jews in the Land of Israel but with the Roman authorities as well.

During a period of relative quiet, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi managed to befriend the Roman emperors who succeeded Hadrian, particularly Marcus Aurelius. Writes historian Rabbi Berel Wein in his *Echoes of Glory* (p. 224):

"Providentially, in the course of the Parthian war, Marcus Aurelius met Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi], and they became friends and eventually confidants ... Marcus Aurelius consulted with his friend in Judah on matters of state policy as well as on personal questions ...

"The years of Marcus Aurelius' reign, ending in his death in 180, was the high-water mark in the intercourse between Rome and the Jews. The Jews, under the leadership of Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi], would use this period of blissful respite to prepare themselves for the struggle of darker days surely lurking around the corner."

At this time -- circa 170-200 CE -- the Mishna was born.

## MISHNA

What is the Mishna?

In past installments we discussed the fact that at Mount Sinai the Jewish people received the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. (See [Part 11](#).) The Oral Torah was the oral explanation of how the written laws should be executed and followed.

The Oral Torah passed from generation to generation and was never written down. (See [Part 26](#) and [Part 32](#)) Why? Because the Oral Torah was meant to be fluid. The principles stayed the same, but the application of those principles was meant to be adapted to all types of new circumstances.

This worked exceptionally well as long as the central authority -- the Sanhedrin -- remained intact, and the chain of transmission was not interrupted. (That is, teachers were able to freely pass on their wisdom to the next generation of students.) But in the days since the destruction of the Temple, the Sanhedrin had been repeatedly uprooted and teachers had to go into hiding.

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi realized that things would not get better any time soon. He saw that the Temple would not be rebuilt in his generation and possibly in many generations to come. He saw the Jews fleeing the land as a result of the constant persecutions and impossible living conditions. He saw that the central authority was weaker than ever and might cease altogether (which is what happened in the 4<sup>th</sup> century as we will discuss in future installments.)

To make sure that the chain of transmission would never be broken, he decided that the time had come to write down the Oral Torah.

This was a mammoth undertaking. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi had to go to as many rabbis as possible in order to extract from them their entire memories. He asked them to tell him all they knew about the legal traditions they received that could be traced back all the way down to Moses at Mount Sinai. He put all those recollections together, edited them, and the end result was the Mishna. (Incidentally, the word *Mishna* means "repetition" because it was studied by repeating; *mishna* then, by extension, means "learning.")

## **SIX CATEGORIES OF JEWISH LAW**

The Mishna was divided into six basic segments dealing with six basic areas of Jewish law:

- *Zeraim*, literally "seeds," covering all agricultural rules and laws for foods as well as all blessings
- *Moed*, literally, "holiday," dealing with the rituals of Shabbat and other Jewish holidays
- *Nashim*, literally "women," examining all the issues between men and women such as marriage, divorce, etc.
- *Nezikin*, literally "damages," covering civil and criminal law
- *Kodshim*, literally "holy things," concerning laws of the Temple
- *Taharot*, literally "pure things," concerning laws of spiritual purity and impurity

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi finished the Mishna in 219 CE in the town of Tzipori in the Galilee. You can visit the site today which is very interesting from an archeological perspective. At a place called Beit She'arim, archeologists found a series of catacombs at the side of a mountain. And they actually found his tomb, with his name on it, along with many other great scholars of that time.

## **WRITING THE TALMUD**

No sooner had Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi finished the Mishna, did the rabbis realize that the Mishna was not enough. It was written in shorthand fashion and in places was cryptic. This is because it was very concise, written on the assumption that the person reading it was already well-acquainted with the subject matter.

So they began to have discussions about it and to write down the substance of these discussions.

Since at this time a significant portion of the Jewish population was living in Babylon, which was outside the bounds of the Roman Empire, the rabbis there put together their discussions, the end product of which was called *Talmud Bavli* or the Babylonian Talmud. In the land of Israel, another set of discussions took place and the end result was *Talmud Yerushalmi* or the Jerusalem Talmud. (Incidentally, the Jerusalem Talmud was not written in Jerusalem; it was written in Tiberias, the last place where the Sanhedrin sat, but was called the Jerusalem Talmud in deference to the Sanhedrin's rightful home.)

**The Talmud is  
the encyclopedia  
of all Jewish  
existence.**

The Jerusalem Talmud is much shorter and much harder to understand than the Babylonian Talmud because the editing had to be much more rushed. The situation in Israel was much worse, while in Babylon it was much more stable. (Today, Jewish students pouring over the Talmud in yeshiva are using chiefly the Babylonian Talmud.)

The Talmud is more than just an application of the details of the Jewish law as expounded in the Mishnah. It's the encyclopedia of all Jewish existence.

The Talmud also contains a lot of *agadata* -- these are stories that are meant to illustrate important points in the Jewish worldview. These stories contain a wealth of information on a huge range of topics. you name it, it's in there.

This information was vital to the Jewish people because Jewish law was never applied by reading a sentence in the Torah and executing it to the letter. Take for example, "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." It was never Jewish law that if someone blinded you, that you should go and blind him. What is the good of having two blind people? It was always understood on two levels: 1) that justice must be proportional (it's not a life for an eye) and 2) that it means the *value* of an eye for the value of the eye, referring to monetary damages. Thus, the Talmud presented the written and oral tradition together.

To read the Talmud is to read a lot of arguments. On every page it seems that the rabbis are arguing. This kind of argument -- the purpose of which was to arrive at the kernel of truth -- is called *pilpul*. This word has a negative connotation outside the yeshiva world, as people read these arguments and it seems to the uneducated eye that the rabbis are merely splitting hairs, and that some of the arguments have absolutely no basis in everyday life. But this is not so.

The reason why the rabbis argued about things that may not have any application to everyday life was to try to get to truth in an abstract way -- to extract the principle. These rabbis were interested in knowing what reality is and in doing the right thing. Reality is what Judaism is all about -- the ultimate reality being God.

Another important point that must be made about these arguments is that they never argued about the big things. You don't see a single argument as to whether or not you eat pork, or whether or not you can light a fire on the Sabbath. These things were a given, they were totally agreed upon. Only small points were



A page of the Talmud

subject to discussion. And these rabbis were wise enough to know that a day would come when the principles established by getting to the core kernel of truth would have far reaching implications.

### GEMARA

When you look at the page of the Talmud today, you will find the Hebrew text of the Mishna is featured in the middle of the page. Interspersed between the Hebrew of the Mishna are explanations in Aramaic which are called the Gemara.

The Aramaic word *Gemara* means "tradition." In Hebrew, the word Gemara means "completion." Indeed, the Gemara is a compilation of the various rabbinic discussions on the Mishna, and as such completes the understanding of the Mishna.

The texts of the Mishna and Gemara are then surrounded by other layers of text and commentaries from a later period.

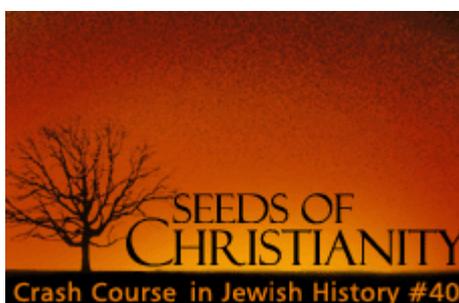
**The text of the Gemorah is quoting the rabbis who lived from about 200 CE to about 500 CE.**

The text of the Mishna is quoting rabbis who lived from about 100 BCE to 200 CE. These rabbi are called the *Tanaim*, "teachers." In this group are included such greats as Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Rabbi Akiva, and of course Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. (In the Gemara, they all have the title *Rebbe* before their first name.)

The text of the Gemara is quoting the rabbis who lived from about 200 CE to about 500 CE. These rabbis are called, *Amoraim*, "explainers" or "interpreters." In this group are included Rav Ashi, Rav Yochanan, etc. (Names of the Amoraim are not so famous, but they all begin with *Rav*.)

The surrounding text of today's Talmud also quotes *Rishonim*, literally "the first ones," rabbinic authorities who predated Rabbi Joseph Caro, the 16<sup>th</sup> century author of the code of Jewish law known as the *Shulchan Aruch*. Among the most prominent *Rishonim* are Rashi, his students and descendants who were the chief authors of the *Tosaphos*, Maimonides and Nachmanides. We will discuss the contributions of these rabbis in future installments.

Just how important was the work of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi and those that followed him would become very clear in the next hundred years when the Jewish people face another threat to their religion. This is when the Roman Empire decides to convert its entire population to Christianity.



**During a time of cruel oppression of the Jews, a number of splinter sects sprang up whose members believed that the Apocalypse was at hand.**

We left off the last installment in the 3rd century with the writing of the Mishna and Gemara which became the Talmud. We are now at a point in our timeline when the Roman Empire is about to convert to Christianity, a move which will have a severe impact on the Jews. However, before we tell that story, we must go back in time to the 1st century, when the Temple still stood.

As we might recall that from the time of the invasion of the Romans and particularly following the persecutions of the sages by [King Herod, the Great](#), the Jewish people were in turmoil. Soon nationalistic feelings would erupt in the [Great Revolt](#) and the Jews would be fighting the Romans as well as each other.

In this atmosphere of tension -- when the Jewish people were yearning for a leader who would help them throw off the Roman yoke -- the seeds of what would later become Christianity were first sown.

## MESSIAH

When Jews yearn for a savior, they are yearning for the Messiah.

It is important to realize that the notion of the Messiah was not invented by Christianity. It is an ancient Jewish idea -- one of the "13 principles of faith" within Judaism. It is recorded numerous times in the various books of the prophets, including Isaiah, Michah, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel.

**The idea of the  
Messiah is one of  
the 13 principles  
of faith within  
Judaism.**

(Indeed throughout Jewish history, strong leaders arose and for a time were mistaken for the Messiah. But when the Messiah did not fulfill the prophecies -- by bringing world peace etc. -- it became clear he was not the Messiah.)

The English word Messiah, comes from the Hebrew word *mashach* which means "to anoint." The *Mashiah* then, is God's "Anointed One." This, for example, is how the Book of Samuel relates the anointing of David as king:

*Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him [David] in the midst of his brothers, and the spirit of God rested on David from that day on. (1 Samuel 16:13)*

The Jewish definition of Messiah is a Jewish leader (without question, a human being), descended from the line of King David (that is, from the tribe of Judah) who will have the Torah knowledge and the leadership ability to bring all the Jewish people back from exile to the Land of Israel. He will rebuild the Temple, bring world peace, and elevate the entire world to the realization of one God.

(For Jewish sources for these points in the order listed above see: Deuteronomy 17:15; Numbers 24:17; Genesis 49:10; 1 Chronicles 17:11; Psalms 89:29-38; Jeremiah 33:17; 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Isaiah 27:12-13; Isaiah 11:12; Micah 4:1; Isaiah 2:4; Isaiah 11:6; Micah 4:3; Isaiah 11:9; Isaiah 40:5; Zephaniah 3:9; Ezekiel 37:24-28.)

The Prophet Isaiah, whose prophecy on this subject is perhaps the best known, describes the Jewish Messianic Vision with these words:

*In the days to come, the Mount of God's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills. And all the nations shall stream to it. And the many peoples shall go and say: "Come, let us go up to*

*the Mount of God, to the House of the God of Jacob -- that He may instruct us in His ways, that we may walk in His paths."* (Isaiah 2:3)

*And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore...* (Isaiah 2:4)

*[At that time] the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the beast of prey shall feed together with a little child to herd them.* (Isaiah 11:6)

Since the notion of a person who will redeem the Jewish people is a fundamental, philosophical part of the Jewish worldview, it is not surprising that the expectation of that redemption always appears at times of crisis.

Indeed, the sages say that the Messiah will be born on the 9th of Av, the worst date in the Jewish calendar when the worst disasters befell the Jewish people (see Parts [13](#), [23](#) and [35](#)).

The Book of Ezekiel, for example, talks of a final showdown -- the War of Gog and Magog -- a terrible war when all the nations turn against the Jews. According to one possible scenario, this is when the Messiah is expected to come and bring final redemption.

This is why, when times are very bad, the Jewish people are prone to think that the final showdown is now. It looks like things couldn't get worse. If so, the Messiah must be right around the corner.

## **DARK TIME**

The Roman occupation was such a dark time in Jewish history. Some of the most brilliant of the rabbinical sages had been murdered by Herod. Corruption had crept into the Temple hierarchy. Jews had split into three major groups:

1. the wealthy Sadducees, who denied the authority of the Oral Law, pledging allegiance to Rome;
2. the fanatical Zealots ready to battle Rome to the death in a suicidal war; and
3. the mainstream Pharisee majority, still loyal to Torah and Oral Law, caught in between.

**The teachings of these splinter sects did not catch on in any significant way among the Jews.** Out of this chaotic time -- marked by virulent anti-Semitism and cruel oppression of the Jews -- were born a number of splinter sects, whose members believed that the Apocalypse was at hand. Finding a receptive ear among the disfranchised, these sects preached that the ultimate battle of good versus evil would soon be fought, followed by the Messianic redemption of humanity.

The Dead Sea Cult -- which became famous in modern times after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and which may or may not have been associated with the Essenes -- was one such sect, but there were many others.

The teachings of these sects did not catch on in any significant way among the Jews. In the same way that the Jews usually rejected foreign religions, they also rejected attempts to tamper with the inner workings of Judaism.

Nevertheless, at this tumultuous time, the Jews were more susceptible than ever before. The countryside was alive with charismatic healers and preachers, and people flocked to them hoping to hear prophecy that the years of strife and suffering were at an end.

The one who would become most legendary, was Joshua, or Jesus, who later in history came to be called *Christ*, which is Greek for Messiah.

It is outside of the scope of a Crash Course in Jewish History to describe the beginnings of early Christianity under Jesus. Currently, there exist approximately 2,700 books in print on the subject, many of them written in recent years discussing the issue of the historical Jesus vs. the legendary Jesus, and debating what he said or did not say and what can be said of him with any certainty.

(For those interested, one good source is a highly readable book by the award-winning British biographer A. N. Wilson, *Jesus: A Life*, which thoroughly analyzes all the data and throws in a fair amount of fascinating speculation as well.)

Historically speaking, very little is known. There are several references in the Talmud to various personalities of whom the rabbis disapproved and some have speculated that one or more of these references are to Jesus. The closest possibility is Yeshu HaNotzri, but according to Jewish chronology, he lived at the time that Joshua Ben Perachyah led the Sanhedrin (circa 150 BCE) and, therefore, predated Jesus according to Christian chronology by almost 200 years.

One would expect -- if Jesus was at all influential in his time -- that his contemporary, the historian Josephus would have devoted considerable space to him. However, Josephus is all but mum on the subject and the few references which supposedly relate to Jesus are considered by virtually all scholars to have been added later by Christian monks who copied such texts for church libraries.

**Josephus is all but mum on the subject of Jesus.** The best we can say with certainty is that the Christian world does agree that Jesus was a Jew who was familiar with the Torah, observed the "Law of Moses" and taught many of its precepts, though he also departed from some of them.

One of the most famous of his teachings consists of two Torah quotations that were staples of Judaism and echoes the emphasis of the rabbinic teachings of his era.

Asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus, as cited in the Gospel of Matthew (22:37-40), replies:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments."

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" is a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is from Leviticus 19:18. These teachings predated Jesus by some 1,300 years.

Of course, the gospels, which are said to record what were the teachings of Jesus were written in Greek many years after his death (which, incidentally, Christian sources give as 32 CE or some 35 years before the destruction of the Temple.)

## JEWISH FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Who were the Jewish followers of Jesus?

The members of the Jesus sect were clearly religious Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They could not have believed that Jesus was "god" and remained Jewish, as such a belief would have been complete idolatry in Jewish eyes and would have appeared closer to the Greco-Roman pagan beliefs where gods took on human form and had relations with humans.

(Indeed, the concept of "son of God" appears later in Christian theology, though the gospels make much use of the term "son of Man" which is taken from the writings of the prophets and refers to the Messiah.)

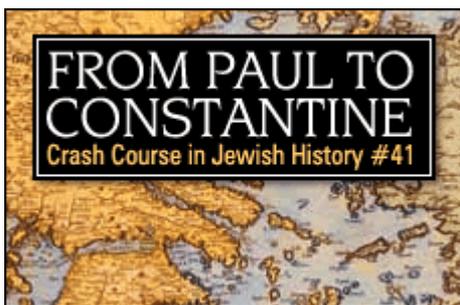
At any rate, the Jesus sect in the Land of Israel was short lived. After the dispersion of the Jews by the Romans following the failure of the Bar Kochba Revolt, the Jewish followers of Jesus disappeared along with the Essenes, the Sadducees and the Zealots. (The Pharisees survived in part due to the vision of their leader, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai as we saw in [Part 34](#))

**The gospels make much use of the term "son of Man" which is taken from the Messianic writings of the prophets.**

So where did all the Christians come from? Indeed, where did Christianity come from?

For the answer, we must look at another colorful personality who appeared on the scene after the death of Jesus, and who is given the credit by virtually every historian of Christianity for spreading the message of Jesus worldwide, if not fashioning Christianity for the consumption of the pagan world.

He was a Jew -- originally known as Saul -- who became famous in Christianity as "Saint Paul."



**At first, Christianity was the most successful where people had been attracted to Judaism but were unwilling to take on all its precepts.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The Jesus sect in Jerusalem remained small and was simply not spreading among the Jews. Indeed, it had become offensive in Jewish eyes and the Jesus followers were considered heretics.

The attitude of the rabbis was that these people, Jews though they may be, are pursuing an ideology that is off the Jewish path and their skewed beliefs are going to pollute the Jewish people. This is a splinter sect that has no place in Judaism, therefore, we've got to drive them out.

One of those who took the driving-out part seriously was a Jew named Saul, originating from Tarsus (a city in Asia Minor, today's Turkey).

But, as he later wrote in his "epistles" or "letters," after participating in persecutions of the Jesus sect, Saul had a sudden change of heart. He wrote that Jesus appeared to him in a vision and dissuaded him from persecuting his followers.

Following this mystical encounter, Saul disappeared from the scene to re-emerge some 13 years later (circa 47-60 CE) as Paul, a missionary to the gentiles.

When he re-emerged on the world scene, Paul introduced some revolutionary ideas, which at first caused some furor among the more seasoned Jesus followers. During a dramatic meeting with the Jesus sect in Jerusalem, his viewpoint won: the new religion would separate from Judaism.

**Paul's viewpoint won: the new religion would separate from Judaism.**

Paul went off on a series of missionizing journeys in which he was highly successful in attracting converts to the new religion -- Christianity.

Paul preached monotheism to be sure, but with one radical innovation. The way of salvation for Gentiles was now much simpler: belief in Jesus replaced observance of the commandments.

Through Paul's efforts, and the zeal of his early disciples, Christianity experienced a meteoric rise in popularity. Its initial successes were all in places where the non-Jewish inhabitants had had significant exposure to Jewish ideas.

## ROMAN ATTRACTION TO JUDAISM

We had previously talked about the tension in the Greco-Roman world that pitted Hellenism against Judaism. But we neglected to mention that there were Romans who were very much attracted to Judaism.

This was especially true in the 1st century CE when, under Nero, the decay of Rome began and thoughtful, intelligent people saw the empire turning into a cesspool of decadence, violence, and overall immorality. Such people were looking for stability, for a universal moral view of the world, and they were casting their eye on some more exotic forms of worship than the official state religion.

Their search brought to Rome many alien religious cults -- in particular the worship of Mithra, the Persian god of light and wisdom, who became identified with Helios, the Greek sun god, as well as Sol, the Roman sun god. This cult came to be so popular that the Romans named a day of the week - "*Sunday*" - in honor of Mithra, and celebrated the sun god's birthday in late December in conjunction with the Winter Solstice.

**According to the Roman writer Varro, Rome had in excess of 30,000 gods and 157 holidays a year.**

Loyalty to the state gods was further weakened by the Roman policy of stealing the gods of conquered peoples. The "captured gods" were then "owned" by Rome and incorporated into the official pantheon. As the empire grew, the number of gods multiplied wildly. According to the Roman writer Varro, at one point, Rome had in excess of 30,000 gods and 157 holidays a year. Who could keep them straight, or, for that matter, take them seriously?

Another important factor was the constant threat of internal rebellion and external invasion with which they lived. The feeling that merciless fate and a cruel death lurked around the corner made one anxious and fearful. (Perhaps all those hours of watching minor criminals

butchered at the Coliseum created a subconscious of "there but for the grace of one of the 30,000 gods go I.")

The atmosphere of impending doom was only heightened by all of the murderous intrigue in politics, by the general corruption, and by the apparent state of moral decline. People gorged themselves on delicacies, then vomited so they could consume even more food. Meanwhile, at the public baths, endless sex orgies with slaves and prostitutes were the way to spend the night.

Historian Michael Grant, in *The World of Rome* (p. 129), sums it up as follows:

"The Roman age was a time of not only uncontrolled blood lust but pessimism and nerve-failure regarding the powers of man to work his own future. The existence and propaganda of the imperial government claiming support of the old gods did not remove the deep-seated feeling that every man was adrift, and everything hazardous. So the presiding deity of nerve-failure was Fortune. 'Throughout the whole world,' says Pliny the Elder, 'at every place and hour, by every voice, Fortune alone is invoked and her name spoken ... We are so much at the mercy of chance that chance is our god.'"

In such an atmosphere, the Jewish view that one is *not* lost at sea in a random and hostile universe, but is looked after by a one, omnipotent and loving God, who orders and runs the world, was likely to get a receptive hearing.

However, conversion to Judaism has always been a major undertaking, one which has historically required the prospective convert to demonstrate his or her sincere desire to follow the Torah's teachings.

Nevertheless, Roman historical records show us that Judaism did catch on, especially in major cultural centers such as Rome and Alexandria. The best-known exporter of hybrid Jewish ideology was Philo Judeas, who lived and taught between 20 BCE to 50 CE. Strongly influenced by Hellenism, he sought to fuse Greek philosophy with Judaism and to export this mixture to the world. Philo was a prolific writer with a considerable following.

Among those who converted at this time was Onkelos, reportedly Nero's nephew, who subsequently translated the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. And historians say Pompeia, Nero's wife, also converted to Judaism, and that Marcus Aurelius seriously considered it.

It cannot be denied that the message and lifestyle of Judaism was very attractive to many Romans. Historian Howard Sachar, in his *History of Israel*, p. 111, suggests an explanation for why this was so:

"The conditions were highly favorable. The old paganism ... was decaying, and sensitive minds were repelled by it. The clear-cut monotheism and the rational practices of the Hebrews, expounded with charm by the Hellenized Jewish writers, made a deep impression. There were great numbers of converts, if not officially to Judaism, at least to Jewish practices and ideals."

This is not to imply that, just because some citizens of the empire converted and many more openly sympathized with the Jews, that the religion of Moses was taking Rome by storm. The reason why was not simple: Jewish laws, restrictions and rituals seemed difficult to follow. While certain commandments such as Sabbath rest and dietary laws were very popular and relatively easy to observe, other rituals of Judaism

were seen as too extreme and too difficult -- for example circumcision and sexual abstinence during a part of each month.

Additionally, many saw Judaism as a national religion of a specific people -- that is, being Jewish meant not only ascribing to a religious faith, but also adopting a different national identity. Naturally, if you were born in Rome, you surely did not want to appear to be giving up your Roman citizenship. It didn't help matters that Judea was one of the most rebellious and troublesome provinces in the empire, and Jews in general were often viewed with suspicion and hostility. This no doubt caused many Romans to think twice about joining Jewish ranks.

This is where Paul stepped in.

## **PAUL'S REVOLUTION**

Paul's shrewdness was to retain the most appealing parts of Judaism and the close connection to the Bible, while dropping the "objectionable" components.

Paul preached that belief in Jesus replaced the laws of the Torah -- that is, all the commandments that the Romans who were attracted to Judaism found so cumbersome.

By converting to Christianity, a Roman was able to subscribe to the Jewish view of one loving God, as well as to the Torah's moral vision of peace, justice, and love of one's neighbor. A Roman could subscribe to these ideas without having to become "different" in the way Jews were "different."

Thus Paul removed the barriers and opened the floodgates.

Writes John G. Gager in *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (p. 140):

"...Christianity preserved all the advantages of its Jewish heritage but without the only two factors that might otherwise have inhibited its growth: the obligation of the ritual law and the close connection between religion and national identity. By proclaiming that the Christ was 'the end of the law' and by presenting itself to the world as 'the new spiritual Israel,' Hellenistic Christianity was able to reap the political and social fruits that had been sown by three centuries of Hellenistic Judaism."

Needless to say, observant Jews objected to Paul, a Jew whom they saw as the worst kind of heretic. Indeed, because of Jewish complaints against him, Paul was arrested by the Roman authorities, held for a time under house arrest, and finally executed in or around 67 CE (the year of the start of the Great Revolt against Rome in Israel.)

Christian tradition has it that Paul and the chief apostle of Jesus, Peter, were buried on Vatican Hill, the current seat of the Roman Catholic Church.

After the death of Paul, Christianity continued to evolve and grow. Many controversies arose as the new religion struggled to develop its core theology.

As this is a Crash Course in Jewish History and not a treatise on Christianity, we are not going to get involved in the discussing the development of the Christian dogmas of the Trinity, virgin birth, resurrection,

etc., nor of the various "heresies" which flourished in early Christian Church. For those interested in the subject, the premier work is by Christian historian Paul Johnson, titled *History of Christianity*.

**It took some 300 years for the early Christian Church to get down its core dogma.**

Suffice it to say that it took some 300 years for the early Christian Church to get down its core dogma, which turned out to be a synthesis of Jewish ideas, Greek ideas and other pagan ideas. With the growth of Christianity came stiff resistance from official Rome -- the new religion was catching on too well and threatening the state religion and therefore stability of the state. Christianity was outlawed in Rome and those who were caught practicing it were regularly crucified or fed to the lions in the Coliseum.

These persecutions which came in waves (depending on the tolerance level of the Roman Emperor in power) actually served to make Christianity stronger. In this regard, the Christians were following the precedent-setting behavior of the Jews in the days of the Greek Empire. (Back then, no one died for their religion -- no one, except the Jews. See Part 28.)

And then, suddenly, in 312 CE, a remarkable thing happened which dramatically changed Christian fortune and led, within a dozen years, to the elevation of Christianity to the state religion of the Roman Empire. The remarkable thing was the conversion of Constantine, who would become the Emperor of Rome.

## **CONSTANTINE**

On the eve of a battle with his rival for the throne of Rome, Constantine reported that he had a dream of Jesus followed by a vision of a cross superimposed on the sun.

Constantine was prone to visions, having a couple years earlier claimed seeing the sun god Sol in a grove of Apollo in Gaul. The juxtaposition of the two -- cross and sun -- was an omen for victory and, when Constantine won the battle, he gave the credit to his new-found god and converted to Christianity.

Oxford scholar David L. Edwards, Provost of London's Southwark Cathedral and author of *Christianity: The First Two Thousand Years*, openly doubts the sincerity of Constantine's conversion as do other Christian scholars.

But such are the quirks of history. Soon Constantine was emperor and he chose to establish his capital in the east, in Byzantium, which was renamed Constantinople.

Eventually, the empire would split into two - the Western empire would collapse in the 5th century, but the Eastern empire would survive another thousand years.) Thus, Christianity became the official state religion of the new order - the Byzantine Empire.

Constantine had initiated a unique way of seeing Christianity - by a merging of pagan and Christian symbols (sun and cross). Over the next few hundred years much more such synthesis followed.

Though Christians like to see Christianity as "the religion of love" and Judaism as "the religion of law," looking at Constantine's record, a Jew might well ask: "What's love got to do with it?"

Writes Johnson in *History of Christianity* (p. 68):

"He [Constantine] had no respect for human life, and as emperor he executed his eldest son, his own second wife, his favorite sister's husband and 'many others' on doubtful charges ... He was much criticized for condemning prisoners of war to mortal combat with wild beasts at Trier and Comar and for wholesale massacres in north Africa."

It didn't help that there was soon unleashed a bitter struggle for wealth and power that was bound to come with being the only act in town.

With the aim of eradicating paganism, Christian mobs scoured the land of the empire smashing idols and burning temples. Writes Johnson (p. 76):

"...it [the Church] transformed itself from a suffering and victimized body, begging toleration, into a coercive one, demanding monopoly..."

Cynics have charged that once it became a state power, the Christian Church turned the cross into a sword, and its ability to convert the Western world had less to do with its message than its methods. By the late 4th century CE the official government efforts at intimidation through laws and decrees - aided by mob terrorism - succeeded in imposing Christianity on the majority of the empire.

With the disappearance of paganism, Judaism began to stick out like a sore thumb. As always, it was strange and separate, and it wouldn't compromise. The stubborn Jews, as they had done with every other religion that had assaulted their belief system previously, were obstinately refusing to bow to the new order.

This presented a special problem, as William Nicholls explains in *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate* (p. 90):

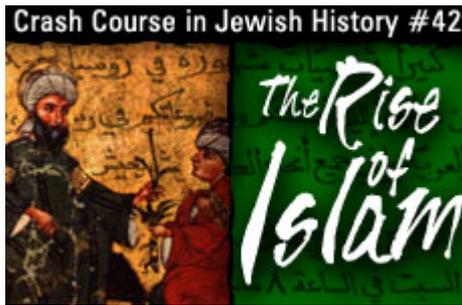
"...the very presence of the Jewish people in the world, continuing to believe in the faithfulness of God to the original covenant ... puts a great question against Christian belief in a new covenant made through Christ. The presence of this question, often buried deep in the Christian mind, could not fail to cause profound and gnawing anxiety. Anxiety usually leads to hostility."

Within a short time, Jews living in the Empire had lost most of their civil rights. (For example, for a Jew to marry a Christian was an offense punishable by death.) The Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, was forbidden to meet, and sermons against the Jews, often inciting violence, were routinely preached. The idea of presenting Jews as the killers of Jesus originated at this time, though it was not popularized until several hundred years later.

By the early 7th century when the Byzantine might began to wobble - facing attacks from the Persians who swallowed up chunks of the territory and even took Jerusalem - the Jews living in the empire were in a very precarious position. Anti-Jewish legislation, heavy taxes and outbreaks of violence and forced conversions, all had taken their toll on the population. Hoping to find a respite from the Christians, some fled back home to safety. But when the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius reclaimed Jerusalem in 629 CE, the poor Jews who found themselves there were brutally massacred.

Praying for relief, these Jews no doubt could never have dreamed that relief would come in the form of a "mixed blessing" from a most unexpected place - from Saudi Arabia. There in Mecca -- a place that had

long been the center of pagan worship at the famed Black Stone of Kaaba -- an unusual man named Mohammed was preaching an unusual message.



**Mohammed reacted with anger when Jews refused to recognize him as the last of the prophets.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In the last installment of this series, we discussed at length the Jewish impact on intellectual Rome prior to the advent of Christianity. Similarly, Jews living on the Arabian Peninsula impacted positively on their Arab neighbors.

During the days of Jewish clashes with the Roman Empire, Jews fled to areas outside the control of Rome and founded many towns and villages in Arabia. One very famous town, almost certainly founded by Jews, was Yathrib. Today Yathrib is better known as Medina and is considered Islam's second holiest city (after Mecca).

As in Rome, the local Jews attracted significant numbers of converts to their way of life and many more admirers.

M. Hirsch Goldberg, in the *Jewish Connection* (p. 33), sums up the story before the early 600's:

"In Arabia, whole tribes converted to Judaism, including two kinds of the Himyarites. French Bible critic Ernest Renan remarked that 'only a hair's breadth prevented all Arabia from becoming Jewish.'"

One of those impressed by the Jews' uncompromising devotion to monotheism was a young trader named Mohammed ibn Abdallah.

**In the early stages of his spiritual awakening, Mohammed came to be greatly impressed by the Jews.**

Although his travels had exposed him to Christianity and he was clearly influenced by it, he found aspects of it troublesome -- in particular, the doctrine of the Trinity did not seem strictly monotheistic in his eyes. He is recorded as having said:

"Unbelievers are those that say, 'Allah is the Messiah, the son of Mary' ... Unbelievers are those that say, 'Allah is one of three.' There is but one God. If they do not desist from so saying, those of them that disbelieve shall be sternly punished." (Koran, Sura 5:71-73)

However, there is no doubt that in the early stages of his spiritual awakening, Mohammed came to be greatly impressed by the Jews. Writes S.D. Goiten in *Jews and Arabs* (pp. 58-59):

"The intrinsic values of the belief in one God, the creator of the world, the God of justice and mercy, before whom everyone high and low bears personal responsibility, came to Muhammad -- as he never ceased to emphasize -- from Israel."

He clearly had some knowledge of the Torah as later he would quote Moses (though not always accurately) more than one hundred times in the Koran, the record of his teachings which became the holy book of his newfound religion. Of the 25 prophets listed in the Koran, 19 are from Jewish scripture, and many ritual laws of Islam parallel Judaism -- circumcision and prohibition against eating pork, for example.

## CHILDREN OF ISHMAEL

Through his studies, Mohammed concluded that the Arabs were the other children of Abraham - through the line of his son Ishmael by the Egyptian maidservant Hagar - and that they had forgotten the teachings of monotheism they had inherited ages ago. He saw his mission as bringing them back. Paul Johnson, in his *History of the Jews* (p. 167), explains:

"What he [Mohammed] seems to have wished to do was to destroy the polytheistic paganism of the oasis culture by giving the Arabs Jewish ethical monotheism in a language they could understand and in terms adapted to their ways. He accepted the Jewish God and their prophets, the idea of fixed law embodied in scripture - the Koran being an Arabic substitute for the Bible - and the addition of an Oral Law applied in religious courts."

There is no argument that the Arab world into which Mohammed was born was badly in need of moral values and social reform. The Mecca of his day was a central place of pagan worship. The Arab tribesmen of the region worshipped a pantheon of gods there, including Al-Lat, the sun goddess, and Al-Uzza, a goddess associated with the planet Venus, both of whom were daughters of the chief deity, known as Al-Ilah, (Allah) or "the God."

**In Mecca stands Kaaba, the shrine enclosing the famous black meteorite, a former site of pagan worship.**

The Kaaba, the shrine enclosing the famous black meteorite which was worshipped in Mecca before Mohammed's time, was also a site for an altar where blood sacrifices were offered to these and other gods.

The morality of the neighboring tribesmen could, charitably, be described as chaotic. Huston Smith, in his classic *The Religions of Man*, (p. 219) goes so far as to call the Arab society before the advent of Mohammed "barbaric." Tribal loyalties were paramount; other than that, nothing served to mitigate the blood feuds, drunken brawls and orgies that the harsh life of the desert gave sway to.

## MOHAMMED'S VISION

Mohammed was repelled by the cruel and crude reality around him. In the year 610, at the age of 40, he escaped to a desert cave where, according to Muslim tradition, he experienced a series of mystical visions, including revelations from the Angel Gabriel. He returned from the desert imbued with a spiritual mission to transform the pagan society around him.

Preaching an end to licentiousness and need for peace, justice and social responsibility, Muhammad advocated improving the lot of slaves, orphans, women and the poor, and replacing tribal loyalties with the fellowship of a new monotheistic faith - which he called Islam, meaning "surrender to God."

Islam, according to Mohammed, was built on five pillars:

- Faith in one God ("there is no God but Allah")
- Prayer (five times a day)
- Charity (2.5% of one's income)
- Pilgrimage to Mecca called Haj (once in a lifetime)
- Fasting (a fast lasting from dawn to dusk for 30 days during the month of *Ramadan*)

Later a sixth pillar was added: Holy War called *Jihad*. (Incidentally, the original meaning of *Jihad* was an *internal* struggle between good and evil, but it was transformed into the idea of an external struggle against the non-Islamic world.)

Initially, he attracted very few followers. After three years, Mohammed had barely forty converts. But, imbued with a passion that has been the hallmark of the truly great visionaries of the world, Mohammed would not give up. And, little by little, he built a steady following of committed loyalists.

The more followers he attracted, the more attention, and with it, the more hostility. The merchants of Mecca, whose livelihood depended on the pagan sites and rites of the city, weren't going to be easily displaced. A murder plot was hatched, but Mohammed escaped just in the nick of time.

While persecution of the Muslims was mounting in Mecca, the city of Yithrab was experiencing problems of internal strife and a delegation decided that the fiery preacher from Mecca would be the man to bring order to chaos. After winning the pledge of city representatives to worship only Allah, Mohammed agreed to migrate. His journey to Yithrab in the year 622 CE, the year 1 of the Islamic calendar, was immortalized as the *Hegira*.

Thus his life was saved and a new horizon opened for his teachings. It was in Yithrab -- heretofore to be known as Medina, "the city of the prophet" -- that Islam took hold in a major way.

Once he had made Medina his stronghold, Mohammed mobilized an army of 10,000 men and, in 630 CE, moved against Mecca, meaning to purify the Kaaba and turn it into a center of worship of the one God, Allah.

His success is legendary. Two years later, when he died all of Arabia was under Muslim control.

## **MOHAMMED AND THE JEWS**

The one problem Mohammed had faced in Medina - and elsewhere - were the Jews, who were not prepared to accept his Arab version of Judaism. In the same way they had previously rejected Christianity, so too did they reject Islam.

It must be pointed out, however, that Jews had a lot less problems with Islam than they did with Christianity. Islam was purely monotheistic, whereas Christianity incorporated a lot of pagan mythology into itself. Islam did not claim that Mohammad was "god" or "son of God" or that God came in three parts. Islam followed many Jewish laws and customs, unlike Christianity which disavowed the law of the Torah in favor of faith in Jesus.

**important agreement was that Abraham was the father of both the Jews and the Arabs.** The most important agreement was that Abraham was the father of both the Jews (through his son Isaac) and the Arabs (through his son Ishmael). This made the two peoples half-brothers. But the chief disagreement came on the issue whether Mohammed was indeed the last of the prophets to be sent by God and that his word was the final revelation. The Jews found the idea unthinkable.

Their rejection was painful to Mohammed who reacted with hostility toward the Jews and took great pains to pointedly separate Islam from its Jewish roots. The Sabbath was changed to Friday; direction of prayers was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca; most of the Jewish dietary laws were excised from Islam with the exception of the slaughter rituals, prohibition on pork and consumption of blood.

Further, Mohammad maintained that the Jews had distorted their own Bible: Abraham did not attempt to sacrifice Isaac to God at Mount Moriah, one of the hills of Jerusalem; rather, Abraham took Ishmael to Mecca, where he offered to sacrifice him to Allah on the Black Stone of Kaaba.

If Jews had previously rebuffed Mohammed's claims to prophecy, they now openly sneered at what they considered a complete fabrication. This only made things worse. Mohammed's anger and curses against the Jews are recorded in the Koran:

- "And humiliation and wretchedness were stamped upon them, and they were visited with wrath from God."
- "Of all men you will certainly find the Jews ... to be the most intense in hatred of those who believe."
- "Vendors are they of error and are desirous that you go astray from the way ... But God has cursed them for their unbelief."

Some of his followers would interpret such statements as license to purge the world of the Jews. Other Muslims would concentrate more on the commonality of heritage and belief that Mohammed had also emphasized, and they would treat the Jews a bit better. (We will see how in future installments of this series.)

## JIHAD

At the time of Mohammed's death in 632, Arabia was united and poised for *jihad*, the "holy war" or "holy struggle" to bring the world to Allah. Shortly, it moved with a fearsome power against the Byzantine and Persian empires.

What did that mean for the Jews?

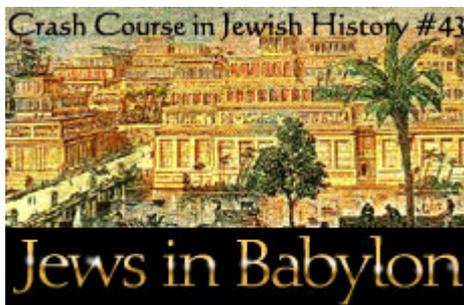
Answers Rabbi Berel Wein in *Echoes of Glory* (p. 299):

"Most Jewish historians (until the recent revisionist-historians) are convinced that the Byzantine Church would have attempted to eradicate Judaism totally if the Church itself had not been defeated and its plan for hegemony in Asia Minor and the Mediterranean basin thwarted by the rising tide of Islam. Thus the coming of Islam may be seen as a providential occurrence that allowed the Jews to slip between the cracks Islam made in Byzantine Church persecution. However, as is the case in all historic 'gifts' in Jewish history, the rise of Islam would prove to be only a mixed blessing for Israel."

Jews were classified as *ahl al-dhimma*, "protected people," and were allowed to live in Islamic countries without being forced to convert. But a whole code of law applied to them, most of it designed to set them apart, humiliate and emphasize their inferior status.

For example, a Jew could never have his head higher than a Muslim. So if a Jew was walking along, and a Muslim passed by, the Jew had to step into the gutter in deference to the Muslim's superior status. A Jew could never testify against a Muslim in court (which basically meant there was no justice for Jews). A Jew could not have a house of worship that was higher than a mosque, which is why (for example) the Four Sephardic Synagogues in the Old City of Jerusalem are subterranean. It should be noted that throughout history some of these laws were not uniformly enforced, and there were periods of time when Jews living in Muslim countries were openly persecuted and others when they were treated very well.

Next we are going to look at one important Jewish community, which at least for a time, flourished under Muslim domination.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The oldest and most stable of Jewish communities was saved from the Christians by Muslims sweeping through the Middle East.**

The story of the Jews of Babylon of necessity begins some 1,000 years before our current timeline -- in the 434 BCE, when the Babylonians first marched on Israel as part of their campaign to stake claim to the former Assyrian empire. In that first foray, the Babylonians did not destroy the Temple, nor send the Jews into exile. However, they did succeed in taking into captivity 10,000 of the best and brightest Jews. ([See Part 22.](#))

While it seemed like a terrible disaster at the time, these brilliant men, Torah scholars all, immediately established a Jewish infrastructure upon arrival in Babylon. A dozen years later when the Temple was destroyed, the Jews who were exiled to Babylon found there yeshivas, synagogues, kosher butchers, etc., all the essentials for maintaining a Jewish life. ([See Part 23.](#))

Seventy years later, when the Babylonians fell to the Persians and the Jews were permitted to return, only a small number did. Of what was probably a million Jews living in the Persian Empire, only 42,000 went back, meaning that 95% stayed in Babylon under Persia domination.

**The Resh Galusa was a person who was a direct descendant of the House of King**

**David.** During the Second Temple period, up until its destruction in 70 CE, the Jewish community in Babylon -- far from the eye of the storm that raged in the Land of Israel -- continued to flourish.

Indeed, this is where the center of Jewish rabbinic authority came to rest after the Byzantine Empire shut down the Sanhedrin in 363 CE.

The head of the Jewish community of Babylon -- who was officially recognized by the Persian authorities -- was called *Resh Galusa* in Aramaic, which means *Rosh Galut* in Hebrew, and "Head of the Diaspora" in English.

The *Resh Galusa* was a person who was a direct descendant of the House of King David. Even though he was not a king in the land of Israel, he was recognized as not only being the representative of the Jewish community in Babylon but as also having noble status.

Over 1,500 year history of the Jewish community in Babylon approximately 40 people held that title, all tracing their ancestry back to King David. This was a noble line that was always preserved in Jewish history.

## **SASSANIAN DYNASTY**

Part of the reason for the stability of the Jewish community in Babylon was that the area was held by the Persian Sassanian dynasty from the 3rd century CE on. The Sassanians managed to keep out of their kingdom first the Romans and then the Byzantines. (For more on the Byzantines see Part 41.) In this way the Jews of Babylon were protected from harm that the Byzantine Christians inflicted elsewhere.

In this atmosphere, Jewish scholarship was able to flourish in the great yeshivas at Sura (which was founded by Rabbi Abba Ben Ibo better known as Rav) and at Nehardea (which was founded by the Babylonian sage Rav Shmuel) and which later moved to Pumbedita.

This is where the Babylonian Talmud was written, as we saw in Part 39, immortalizing the great rabbis of Babylon, especially Abbaye and Rava. As historian Berel Wein relates in *Echoes of Glory* (p. 267):

"Their stamp of analysis and discussion appears in countless numbers of debates and discussions that form the Talmud. In fact, the surname of the Talmud is "the discussions of Abbaye and Rava."

(Another great rabbinic scholar in Babylon was Rav Ashi, the editor-in-chief of the Babylonian Talmud in the early 5th century.)

These rabbis, as we explained in Part 39, are known in Jewish scholarship as *Amoraim*, "explainers" or "interpreters." The *Amoraim* lived from about 200 CE to about 500 CE. They were followed by the *Gaonim*, the "great ones" or "geniuses." The *Gaonim* were the heads of the yeshivas in a time when Jewish scholarship thrived in Babylon.

But then the situation changed.

Things began to worsen for the Jewish Babylonian community in the middle of the 5th century when the Persian priests, fighting against encroaching Christian missionaries, unleashed anti-Christian persecutions and included Jews in the meyhem. Writes Wein (p. 277):

"The worsening situation in Babylonia came as a shock to the Jewish community, for nothing of this sort had officially been in Babylonia for almost a millenium. Jewish confidence was shattered."

Things went from bad to worse -- with the *Reish Gelusa* executed at one point -- as Babylonia became embroiled in civil war and as the Byzantines continued their encroachments.

In the midst of this chaos, the Moslem conquest of the Middle East in the 7th century brought unexpected benefits to the Jewish community in Babylon.

## CALIPH OMAR

Mohammed had died in 632 leaving no successor, a situation which led to immediate strife and a split in the nascent Muslim world. The candidates for *caliph* were two: 1) his cousin Ali, who married Mohammed's daughter Fatima; and 2) his first convert and father-in-law, Abu Bakr.

This struggle gave rise to the creation of two Muslim sects: 1) the Shi'ites who recognized Ali as Mohammed's rightful successor ; and 2) the Sunnis, who recognized Abu Bakr as the rightful successor.

Today, the Shi'ites are the minority in the Muslim world, making up 16% of all Muslims. The majority of the Muslims are Sunnis, followers of Abu Bakr and his successor Omar, who founded the first major Islamic dynasty, the Omayyad (sometimes spelled Umayyad).

Caliph Omar recognized that the road to unity was to have a common enemy. He therefore embarked on a series of foreign wars of conquest, in which the Muslims were remarkably successful.

As part of his conquests Caliph Omar invaded Jerusalem in 638, taking it away from the Byzantines.

**Caliph Omar  
invaded  
Jerusalem in 638,  
taking it away  
from the  
Byzantines.**

To see the remains of Byzantine homes from that period, you can visit today the archeological excavations below the southern end of the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was this area, in particular, that Omar turned over to 70 Jewish families following his conquest. (Until then the Byzantines had forbidden the Jews from living in Jerusalem at all.)

He found the Temple Mount site covered with garbage as the Byzantines had deliberately decreed that garbage should be dumped there to humiliate the Jews. Omar had the site cleared and may have prayed at the southern end (toward Mecca) which could well be the first time that a small mosque was erected there, though historians are not certain.

It must be made clear that up to this time, Jerusalem had no special significance to Muslims. During his lifetime already, Mohammed had changed the direction of prayer to Mecca, and the Koran does not mention Jerusalem even once!

However with time a tale arose that Mohammed's dream -- which is recorded in the Koran in Sura 17 -- was a dream about Jerusalem. In that dream, Mohammed rides his flying horse, El Burak -- a steed with the body of a woman and the tail of a peacock -- to the "farthest place." The farthest place in Arabic is *El Aksa*. There he meets *Jebriel* (Gabriel) and goes up to heaven for a forty day sojourn, meeting all the prophets and talking to Moses and Jesus etc.

The Muslims decided that the farthest place (*El Aksa*) had to be the farther end (southern end) of the Temple Mount. And that the center of the Temple Mount, where a huge stone protruded, must be the spot from which Mohammed ascended to heaven.

In 691, some fifty years after Omar's conquest, an Omayyad ruler named Abd al Malik built the Dome of the Rock, called *Qubbat as Sakrah*, there. It still stands today and dominates the Jerusalem skyline.

Note that the Dome of the Rock is not a mosque. Rather it is a shrine built around the huge rock, which Jews believe to be the same stone where Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed, where Jacob dreamed of a ladder to heaven, and where the Holy of Holies once stood. The mosque -- El Aksa -- is another building altogether, built at the southern end of the Temple Mount by Abd al Malik's son, El Walid in 701.

The Dome of the Rock was not always golden as it is today. It was covered with anodised aluminum in 1956, and about ten years ago, the late King Hussein of Jordan, sold one of his houses in London and gold-plated it with 80 kilos of gold.

Today, this site is the third holiest to Suni Muslims and the fourth holiest to Shi'ite Muslims, who list Karabala, after Mecca and Medina.

**Jerusalem is known to Muslims call *El Quds*, "the Holy."**  
The Temple Mount is known to Muslims as *Haram el Sharif*, "the Noble Sanctuary."  
The taking of Jerusalem was a big blow to the Christians, reeling from other Muslim conquests that were sweeping the world. Jews greeted it more favorably, as the Christians had been merciless to the Jews. The Muslims might humiliate them, but they would not slaughter them outright.

Indeed, when Omar defeated the Persians and took over Babylonia, he immediately gave his blessing to the *Reish Galusa* to head the Jewish community. As a matter of fact, Omar was so fond of the *Reish Galusa* -- Bustenai Ben Haninai -- that when he himself decided to marry the daughter of the Persian king, he insisted that Bustenai marry her sister. Thus in a bizarre twist of fate, the *Reish Galusa* became brother-in-law to the caliph.

(After the death of Bustenai, his sons by an earlier wife sought to delegitimize his sons by the Persian princess, claiming that she never converted to Judaism. However, this was unlikely as the case of a *Reish Galusa* marrying a non-Jewish woman without conversion would have caused a furor and public condemnation. Indeed the *Gaonim* of the day ruled that all his children were legitimate Jews.)

## THE KARAITES

During the long history of Babylonian Jewry, sometimes the *Reish Galusa* wielded more power, sometimes the *Gaonim*. Much depended on the political climate and the personalities involved. Generally, however, the position of the *Gaon* was determined by scholarship, while the position of *Reish Galusa* was depended on lineage (as the *Reish Galusa* was traditionally the descendant of King David.)

And it was a dispute over lineage that gave rise to a splinter sect in 8th century Baghdad -- a splinter sect that came to be known as the Karaites!  
[HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)

When Shlomo, the *Reish Galusa*, died childless in 760, two of his nephews Hananiah and Anan vied for the position. Hananiah got the job and Anan went off to start his own religion.

This is another example of a pattern we have seen previously -- a split among the Jews due to an ego problem. (We saw it, for example, in Part 20 with Rehoboam and Jeroboam.)

The sect that Anan started in some ways was similar to the Sadducees. Like the Sadducees, the Karaites didn't recognize the authority of the Oral Torah and hence they read the Written Torah literally. (Their name, Karaites, comes from the Hebrew verb, *kara*, meaning "read.")

As we saw earlier, it is impossible to live a Jewish life without the Oral Torah as so much of the Written Torah is not specific enough. Thus, where the Torah commands "and you shall write them [these words] upon the doorposts of your home," how can anyone know which words of the Torah, or indeed, if the entire Torah is to be written on the doorpost? It is the Oral Torah that explains that this passage refers to the words of the *Shema* prayer, which are to be written on a parchment scroll and then affixed in a specified place and manner on the doorpost. The *mezuzah*!

**The Karaites observe Shabbat in total darkness.** As a result of their literal reading of the Torah, the Karaites came to observe Shabbat in total darkness, unable to leave their homes all day except to go to the synagogue. They did away with the observance of Chanukah because it is not mentioned in the Written Torah, as well as with the separation of meat and milk for the same reason.

One might think that this sect would have little appeal, and initially it did not. But, with time, the Karaites began to attract those Jews who wanted to dismiss the opinions of the rabbis; this turned out to be a huge draw.

That is, until the great sage, the Sa'adiah Gaon entered the picture.

## SA'ADIAH GAON

Sa'adiah Gaon is famed for his writings, particularly the *Book of Belief and Opinions*, and for his critiques of the Karaites which made mincemeat of their beliefs.

His arguments stopped the spread of Karaism which could have overwhelmed the entire Jewish world. It was so popular at one point that in the 10th century the majority of Jews in the Land of Israel were Karaites.

However, the Karaites never recovered from the assault of Sa'adiah Gaon on the logic of their beliefs. Their numbers shrunk with time, though unlike the Sadducees, they never completely disappeared.

(Incidentally, up until World War II, there was a large Karaite community in the Crimea, which in trying to save themselves from the Nazis, claimed that they were not actually Jews. Of course, they were murdered too.)

Today, there is a small number of Karaites left, living chiefly in Israel, though no one is sure how many as the Karaites forbid census-taking. Their population has been variously estimated at 7,000 all the way up to 40,000. The Karaites are reputed to be very religious people, and from the outside appear indistinguishable from Orthodox Jews, though they are forbidden to marry other Jews and marry only each other.

When the Sa'adiah Gaon died in 942, the period of the *Gaonim* of Babylon was almost over. It would officially end in 1038 with the death of Chai Gaon. By then, a great many Jews had left Babylon, following the opportunities that were opening up for them in other parts of the world conquered by Muslims, especially in Spain.



**The land of opportunity for Jews -- from the 8th to the 12th century -- was Spain.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

As the armies of Islam conquered larger and larger swaths of Europe, the Jews of the Middle East saw new opportunities opening up for them in Muslim Europe.

One of the best opportunities proved to be Spain, starting with the Muslim conquest of 711. Indeed, things were so good for Jews there, that to this day, half the Jewish world is known as *Sephardi* meaning "Spanish." (The other half would later become known as Ashkenazi, meaning "German.")

**Jews found a symbiotic relationship emerging between them and the Muslim world.** In the Muslim Spain, Jews found a symbiotic relationship emerging between them and the non-Jewish world that surrounded them. So for one thing, the Muslims impacted on the Jews. Some of the greatest Jewish scholars wrote in Arabic. But the impact was much greater the other way around. Indeed there can be no question that the Islamic world, especially in Spain, did remarkably well because of the large number of Jews who were allowed to operate freely there.

## **JEWISH CONTRIBUTIONS**

The Jewish contributions came in every sphere -- whether economic or intellectual. For example:

- Jews excelled in skilled crafts.

Jews were excellent tanners, metalworkers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, and jewelers. (We see some of these skills surviving today. Yemenite Jews continue their reputation as silversmiths and Jewish diamond merchants are famous the world over.)

- Jews excelled in the sciences, particularly in medicine.

Jewish doctors were everywhere, among the most famous was Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the 10th century physician to two caliphs who was considered one of the most influential people in Spain.

- Jews excelled in trade.

Jews were the middlemen between the Muslim and Christian worlds, which at this time were engaged in huge rivalry and were not communicating directly with each other. As a result Jews became traders who covered the Far East, the Middle East, and Europe.

- Jews excelled in scholarship.

The Muslims were fascinated by classical knowledge, but since they did not know either Greek or Latin, the Jews came in to fill the gap translating these works into Arabic. The Jews also helped to disseminate Arabic scholarship to Christian Europe translating Arabic texts first into Hebrew, then sending these translated texts to Europe, where other Jews translated the Hebrew into Latin -- the language of the Roman Empire that was still in use then.

## WRITERS AND PHILOSOPHERS

Some of the greatest Jewish writers and philosophers came from this time period. Three deserve special mention:

- Abraham ibn Ezra, the famed physician, philosopher, astronomer, and biblical commentator.
- Bachya ibn Pakuda, the famed moralist who authored *Duties of the Heart* (a book that continues to be a highly popular text in Jewish ethical studies today), examining the obligations of one's inner life and presenting a system to assess one's true religious commitment.
- Judah HaLevi, the famed author of *The Kuzari*, a philosophical novel based on the story of the king of Khazaria, a kingdom located between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. (In the 8th century the king of Khazaria, undecided whether he should affiliate with the Christians or Muslims, had great scholars argue before him the merits of the world's religions, and as a result of this debate converted to Judaism as did a goodly portion of his country; the history of Khazaria ended in 11th century when it was destroyed by a Byzantine/Russian coalition.) Basing himself on this reportedly true story, Judah HaLevi imaginatively recreated the debate before the king in his novel, which continues to be popular to this day.

The Jewish paradise in Spain ended abruptly when a cruel Muslim Berber Dynasty -- Almohades -- came to power in the 12th century. When Almohades seized southern Spain, they gave the Jews three choices: covert to Islam, leave, or die.

Of the many Jews fleeing Spain at this time was none other than the famed Maimonides (often known as Rambam, the acronym of his full name, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon).

**Of the many Jews fleeing Spain at this time was one other than the famed Maimonides.**

(Incidentally, you may have noticed that so many of the famous Jews were known by their acronyms. This is because Jews did not have last names; they did not use last names until forced to by Christian tax collectors later in history. Jews were known by their first names and their father's names, sometimes by their tribal names, such as Cohen or Levi, or places of their origin, and therefore, it was easier to shorten so

many words to an acronym.)

## MAIMONIDES

Maimonides was born Moses ben Maimon on the eve of Passover in 1135 in Cordoba, Spain, to a prominent rabbinical family. In his family tree figured King David and Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi, who had compiled the Mishnah (as we saw in Part 39).

His primary teacher was his father, Rabbi Maimon ben Joseph, a Jewish judge, who taught him not only the Talmud, but also the fundamentals of mathematics, astronomy and philosophy.

Maimonides was only 13 when his family was forced to leave Spain. After wandering homeless for many years -- wanderings during which his father died -- Maimonides and his brother David finally settled in Cairo, Egypt. There Maimonides continued his Torah studies, while his brother David, a dealer in gems, supported the family. When David perished in a sea voyage, the burden fell on Maimonides.

Maimonides refused to make money from his Torah knowledge, and therefore, in order to earn a living, he taught himself medicine. Within a short time, he was so famous as a healer that he was appointed physician to the Court of Sultan Saladin in Cairo. He was also appointed the chief rabbi of Cairo.

He was not proud to be living in Egypt, however. It is against Jewish law for Jews to live in Egypt after the Exodus, so he would sign himself "Moses ben Maimon who violates the commandments of the Torah daily by living in Egypt."

In addition to being a famous doctor and healer, Maimonides was a prolific writer. Of his voluminous works -- most of which were composed in Arabic but written with Hebrew characters -- four stand out as perhaps the most famous:

- *Commentary on the Mishnah* -- his explanation of the Mishnah
- *Mishneh Torah* -- his codex of all the legal decisions of the Talmud (it's also known as *Yad Hazakah*)
- *Guide to the Perplexed* -- his explanation of how seemingly contradictory teachings of the Torah are in fact part of a complete unified whole
- *Discourse on the World to Come* -- his explanation of the Messianic Age which includes the 13 Principles of Faith (this discourse is contained in his introduction to Tractate Sanhedrin 10:1)

(For translations of key excerpts from Maimonides' seminal works see *The Essential Maimonides* by Avraham Yaakov Finkel.)

During his time the writings of Maimonides proved highly controversial. Some of his statements were deemed too radical, others were simply misunderstood. At one point, his works were banned, and after his death in 1204, they were burned at the instigation of the rabbis.(in 1233)

However, when nine years later, the French king Louis IX ordered the Talmud burned, Jews interpreted this as a "measure-for-measure" punishment from God for the burning of the works of Maimonides. Indeed, the rabbi who instigated the ban and burning, Rabbi Jonah Gerondi, subsequently repented for doing so and authored the book *Sha'arei Teshuva*, "Gates of Repentance," as a form of atonement for his derogatory statements about Maimonides.

Today the works of Maimonides are universally accepted and revered. Indeed, Maimonides is known in the Jewish world as one of most important of the *Rishonim* or "the First Ones."

This group of Jewish sages follows those we have previously discussed: the *Tanaim* or "Teachers" (200 BCE to 100 CE) who are quoted in the Mishnah; the *Amoraim* or "Explainers" (200 to 500), who are quoted in the Gemara; and the *Gaonim* or "Geniuses" (500 to 1038) who were the masters of the post-Talmudic Babylonian academies. The *Rishonim* (1038 to 1439) added significantly to Jewish scholarship.

In addition to Maimonides, among the most famous of the *Rishonim* was the French rabbi, Solomon ben Isaac, known the world over by his acronym -- Rashi.

## RASHI

A question may be asked here, how did Jews end up in France?

First of all, some Jews settled already some 1,000 years earlier in the far-flung outposts of the Roman Empire. But for a long time these Jewish settlements were small. The expansion came through some interesting quirks of fate.

Jewish tradition has it that in the 8th century Charlemagne, the King of the Franks, seeing how helpful Jews were to the Muslims, asked the caliph to send him a few rabbis, knowing that once he had rabbis more Jews would follow.

Additionally, Jews were frequently kidnapped by pirates who knew that their fellow Jews would pay handsomely to redeem them. A small group of French Jews put up a lot of money to redeem Rabbi Nosson HaBavli in just such circumstances on the condition that he come and start a yeshiva in their community in France -- which he did.

Rashi, the most famous of the French rabbis was born Solomon Ben Isaac in 1040 in France, though he was sent to study in a yeshiva in Germany.

**Just like Maimonides, Rashi refused to make money from his Torah knowledge.** After he completed his studies, Rashi returned to France and settled in his hometown of Troyes. Just like Maimonides, he refused to make money from his Torah knowledge, earning a living instead from several vineyards that he owned. Rashi had an absolutely encyclopedic knowledge of the Torah. He took it upon himself to answer some of the most obvious questions that come up when reading the text. This is why today so many editions of the Torah include his explanations alongside the text.

The other thing that Rashi did was to write a commentary on the entire Babylonian Talmud. Today this commentary appears on the "inner" margin of virtually every Talmudic page. We find his explanations indispensable because as we move further and further away from Mount Sinai, it becomes harder and harder to understand the nuances of Jewish law.

Rashi did not have sons, but he did have two very famous daughters, Miriam and Yocheved, whom he educated in the Talmud. Rashi's daughters married great scholars and fathered great scholars. Rashi's sons-in-law, his students, and his descendants became part of a group of scholars that is known as the *Ba'alei HaTosefot*, meaning "Masters of Addition." The *Ba'alei HaTosefot* added commentary to the Talmud

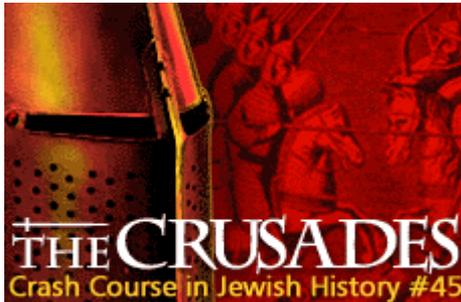
which is featured on the "outer" margin of every Talmudic page. The best known of this group is Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Jacob ben Meir, also known as Rabbeinu Ta'am.

Rashi lived until 1105 and he survived the first Crusade, which saw the slaughter of about 30% of the Jews of Europe.

According to Jewish tradition, he met one of the leaders of the Crusade, the French nobleman Godfrey de Bouillon. As Godfrey embarked on the Crusade to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims, Rashi told him that he would succeed but that he would come back home with only two horses. In response, Godfrey vowed that if Rashi's prediction was wrong, he'd kill him upon his return.

As it happened, Godfrey came back home from the Crusade with only *three* horses, but as he entered the archway to the city of Troyes, the center stone of the arch fell and killed one of them.

Next we will see just what role Godfrey de Bouillon played in the Crusades and how this shameful period in history came about.



**The Crusaders came to liberate the Holy Land from the "infidels" and woe to any Jews who stood in their way.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

As long as the Byzantine (Eastern) Empire, with its seat in Constantinople, dominated the Christian Church, it maintained the balance of power between the bishop of Constantinople and the bishop of Rome. But when it began to crumble, Rome began to assert itself.

As we will see, the Crusades originated with Rome. However, before we can discuss the Crusades and how they impacted the Jews, we must first set the stage and go back in history.

Ever since the 4th century, the Western (Rome-based) Empire had been shrinking considerably, thanks to the Goths and Franks. It finally disappeared altogether in 476. The resulting vacuum in the economic, legal and administrative infrastructure led to a state of chaos. The Church, aligning itself with the Franks, stepped in to restore order.

Consciously modeling its bureaucratic framework on the model of the old, the Church created titles and administrative positions which people were used to. It's not by accident that the pope (from the Latin papa or "father") was called pontiff (from *pontifex maximus* or "chief priest") -- a title previously reserved for the Roman emperor.

Today we remember the period of time when the Church ruled Western Europe with an iron hand as the "Dark Ages," although more charitable historians will call it the "Middle Ages."

## FEUDALISM

With its well-organized bureaucracy, the Church found itself assuming a position of paramount importance in the evolution of feudalism in European society.

Feudalism has its roots in all the warring that was going on in this period of time. To support the cavalry, the kings gave their soldiers estates of land farmed by dependent laborers. It was a huge pyramid with the majority of the population at the bottom, working as serfs or virtual slaves for somebody else.

**Feudal serfs worked at backbreaking labor, dawn to dusk. They lived in absolute filth and squalor.**

Feudal serfs worked at backbreaking labor, dawn to dusk. They lived in absolute filth and squalor. It is impossible for us to imagine today the conditions and the deprivations of this time period.

The Church's role in the feudal system was quite ironic. Not only didn't the Church fight this injustice, the Church helped to create it, and profited handsomely from it.

The Church supported the inequality of the feudal system through its various dogmatic formulations, which strongly implied that God Himself wants things this way, that poverty has great spiritual value, and that the king is a divinely ordained human being whose authority cannot be questioned.

Why? Because the Church was "a major player" in the feudal game. Early in its history, the Church started to acquire land. At first, the Church took over the properties of pagan temples and temple priests. But it continued to expand its holdings, until it became by far the biggest landowner in Europe, collecting huge amounts of taxes from the hapless peasants.

Oxford scholar Henry Phelps-Brown in *Egalitarianism and the Generation of Inequality* (p. 33) suggests that the Church, while it embodied monotheism, had yet to rid itself of the old Hellenistic pagan tendencies:

"Thus Christianity itself, and the views on wealth and power that came down from it, did not challenge the inequality of the secular world. They rather upheld it ... In this way they followed the main drift of the pagan philosophies. The inequality of human capacity was obvious, the need for subordination inescapable."

As the Church's empire grew in size so did its need for more money to support it. While the Crusades were launched in part to curb the growth of the Islam Empire, a key motivation was to gain new lands and wealth for the growing population of Europe. They offered an outlet for the ambitions of land-hungry knights and noblemen.

The ostensible reason given at the time, however, was the reclamation of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem from the Muslims. This church had been originally built on the site identified in the 4th century by Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine, as the site where Jesus was buried following his crucifixion.

(This church still stands today, after being rebuilt by the Crusaders; it is a focal point of Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem although Protestant Christian denominations contend that it is not the site of Jesus' burial.)

## THE "NOBLE" QUEST

To our Western minds, reared on the Hollywood version of so much history, the Crusades mean noble knights rescuing damsels in distress. Oy vey -- is that ever a lie.

Now, it's true that there were knights, and there were kings, and there was a chivalric ideal. And that King Richard the Lionhearted, a Crusade leader, (who was incidentally one of the worst kings England ever had) was definitely a macho warrior. But that's pretty much where it ends.

The Crusades turned into campaigns of slaughter, rape, and pillage, and woe to the poor Jews in the way. Indeed, the Crusades mark the first large-scale mob violence directed against Jews which is going to become, unfortunately, the pattern for the next hundreds of years. The later pogroms are just going to be a repeat of this idea.

**The Jews were not the only -- and in fact, not the primary -- victims of the Crusaders. Muslims were.** The Jews were not the only -- and in fact, not the primary -- victims of the Crusaders. Muslims were. If you're a student of Islamic history, you know that a large part of the reason why the Arab world is today the way it is has to do with the Crusades. All the brutality directed toward them devastated the Arab peoples economically, made the Arab world very closed, and contributed to Arab hatred of the West. (Why do Arabs paint the doors of their houses blue to this day? To ward off the evil eye. Why blue? One explanation is that it was the color of the blue-eyed northern Europeans that came to slay them.)

There were altogether ten Crusades covering a swath of time between the 11th through the 13th centuries:

- The First Crusade, 1095-1099, saw the taking of Jerusalem from the Muslims, the slaughter of both the Muslim and Jewish populations of the city, and the establishment of the Crusader-run Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (which lasted only until 1187).
- The Second Crusade, 1147-1149, was organized to help the Christians to recover lands which they lost to the Turks, but it ended in dismal failure.
- The Third Crusade 1189-1192 was organized after Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt, recaptured Jerusalem. This is the Crusade in which King Richard the Lionhearted figured. It was a failure.
- The Fourth Crusade, 1202-1204, saw the capture of Constantinople, which at the time was occupied by Greek-speaking Eastern Orthodox Christians, who did not recognize the authority of the Roman Pope.
- The Children's Crusade, 1212, sent thousands of children for the Holy Land, where they were captured by Muslims only to be sold as slaves or to die of hunger or disease.
- The Fifth Crusade, 1217-21, was aimed at Egypt, but failed.
- Four more Crusades mounted in the 13th century failed to reverse the Muslim gains. In 1291 the last Crusader stronghold at Acco fell.

That's the picture in a nutshell. Now we can look in greater detail at the aspects of the Crusades which most impacted on the Jews.

(For anyone interested in knowing more about specific Crusades, the authoritative source is a book by H.E. Mayer, called *The Crusades*, published Oxford University Press.)

Pope Urban II mounted the first campaign, in part in response to a plea for help from Christians in Constantinople who were besieged by the Muslims. Its aim was to beat back the "infidels" (as Christians called their fellow monotheists) and to recapture the Holy Land.

To sweeten the pie, the Pope promised those that signed up that there would be plenty of booty, not to mention the spiritual benefit of having all your sins forgiven by God.

The Pope received an enthusiastic response. An armed force of 15,000 -- including 5,000 knights and the rest infantry -- set off wearing a large red cross on their outer garments (hence their name Crusaders from the Latin word meaning "cross," though they called themselves "pilgrims").

A peasant force also joined in. As these peasants started marching through Europe (in advance of the knights), they needed to eat, and eat they did by pillaging the countryside. As they were marching along they got the idea that they might as well get rid of the infidels in their midst -- namely the Jews.

Here is one eyewitness account of an attack on the Jewry of Mainz in May of 1096. This comes from *The First Crusade* by August Krey, and it is a letter written by a Jew who survived:

"The Jews of the city, knowing of the slaughter of their brethren fled in hope of safety to the Bishop of Ruthard. They put an infinite treasure in his guard and trust having much faith in his protection. He placed the Jews in a very spacious hall in his own house that they might remain safe and sound in a very secure and strong place.

"But ... the band held council, and after sunrise attacked the Jews in the hall with arrows and lances, breaking down the bolts in the doors. They killed the Jews, about 700 in number who in vain resisted the force of an attack of so many thousands. They killed the women also and with their sword pierced tender children whatever age and sex..."

This is how about 30%-50% of the Jewish community of Europe met its end. Some 10,000 Jews of an estimated population of about 20,000-30,000 were slaughtered by Crusaders mobs.

## **FALL OF JERUSALEM**

After conquering Antioch in Turkey, the Crusaders got to Jerusalem, many of their number gone due to the heavy fighting along the way.

At the gates of Jerusalem, fighting in the blistering sun heating up their heavy impregnable armor, many more of the knights died.

In Part 44, in our discussion of Rashi, we mentioned the French nobleman Godfrey du Bouillon. Godfrey -- plus Raymond of Guilles, Raymond of Flanders, and Robert of Normandy -- besieged the gates of Jerusalem which at that time had a significant population of Jews. Their forces breached the walls and poured into the city.

(Incidentally, the Crusader cry of "Hep! Hep!" originated at this time. It was an acronym for the Latin of "Jerusalem Has Fallen." With time it became "Hip, Hip, Hooray!" -- a cheer that Jews never use.)

**The Crusaders surrounded the poor Jews huddled together in a synagogue and burned them alive.**

What happened after the Crusaders entered the city?

We have one account from Ibn Al Kalanisi, the Moslem chronicler, describing hair-raising behavior of unnecessary brutality. The poor Jews had all huddled together in a synagogue and this is where the Crusaders found them, set the place on fire, and burned them alive.

The Crusaders, once they conquered Jerusalem, embarked on a vast building effort all over Israel. The ruins of the many fortresses and churches they built can be visited today. (Most of these were destroyed by the Muslims once they reclaimed their earlier holdings, in fear that the Crusaders would return.)

The Crusaders established special orders of knights to look after this kingdom. Those that interest us in particular are the Knights Templars and the Knights Hospitalers.

The Knights Templars were stationed on the Temple Mount (hence their name). Interestingly, Knights Templars did not destroy the Dome of the Rock (though the Crusaders did destroy all the mosques that they did not turn into churches). Why? They thought it was the "Temple of Solomon," and that the nearby Al Aksa mosque was the "Palace of Solomon." (See *Jerusalem: An Archeological Biography* by Hershel Shanks, p. 238-239.)

So what did they do? They removed the crescent from the top of the Dome of the Rock, replaced it with a cross, and called the place *Templum Domini*, "Temple of God." They turned the El Aksa mosque, as well as the vaulted space below the mosque, into a monastery. Consistent with their other errors, they called this space, which had been built by Herod -- "Solomon's Stables."

(These so-called stables have recently been excavated by the Muslim Wakf and transformed into another mosque amid enormous archeological devastation, which the government of Israel felt powerless to stop.)

The Knights Hospitalers were supposed to provide hospitality to the large numbers of Christian pilgrims who would come down and visit the Christian holy sites, and to care for the sick among them. (Thus we see the word for hospitality became synonymous with a place of care for the sick -- hospice or hospital.)

The Knights Hospitalers built their main complex near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a logical place for it. Another complex -- consisting of church, hospice and hospital -- was built in what is today the heart of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City Jerusalem near the main staircase going down to the Western Wall. This ruin has been preserved and is a tourist attraction. Nearby Crusader buildings have been renovated and are in use as apartments, schools and shops. (See *Jerusalem Architecture* by David Kroyanker, p. 37-43.)

Needless to say, the Knights Hospitalers did not provide hospitality to Jews. In fact, they brought in Christian Arab tribes to help populate the city with Christians.

But Jews always yearned to be part of the holy city. One such Jew, who braved the Crusader occupation of the Holy Land, was none other than the famed poet and writer Judah HaLevi (whose work *The Kuzari* we discussed in Part 44).

Judah HaLevi managed to reach the city, but was trampled to death by a Christian Arab horseman just outside one of the city gates. As he lay dying, he is said to have recited one of his own poems: "Zion, shall I see you ... I shall cherish your stones and kiss them, and your earth will be sweeter than honey to my taste." (See Martin Gilbert, *Jerusalem: An Illustrated Atlas*, p. 21.)

## **SULTAN SALADIN**

The reign of the Crusaders over the Holy Land was short lived. In less than one hundred years, in fact in 1187, the Crusaders are conquered by Sultan Saladin of Egypt (whose family, by-the-way was employing Maimonides as their physician as we saw in Part 44).

Sultan Saladin beat the Crusaders at what was one of the most important battles in the medieval history of the Middle East -- at the Horns of Hattin, which is northwest of the Sea of Galilee. There Saladin very skillfully managed to lure the Crusaders out into the open. In the middle of the summer and burning heat, they found themselves vastly outmaneuvered and outnumbered, and this is how Saladin destroyed them.

Even though they lost Jerusalem, the Crusaders didn't give up. They mounted campaign after campaign to recoup the Holy Land. They never did get Jerusalem back, (although the Moslems did grant them access to Christian holy sites there). Finally, in 1291, the last Crusader stronghold -- in Acco (also known as Acre) -- fell.

Today we have amazing ruins from the Crusader period all over Israel. Some of the most massive and impressive are in Caesarea, Acco, Tiberias and in Belvoir (near the battle site of Hattin). If you should happen to visit any of these sites, keep in mind while admiring them, what the Crusaders did to the Jews.

## **NEXT: BLOOD LIBEL**

### **Note:**

**I have received a lot of feedback from Christian readers regarding the topic of Medieval anti-Semitism. Most of the comments come from evangelical Christians who claim that those who persecuted Jews in the Middle Ages were not really true Christians and that I shouldn't lump all Christians together.**

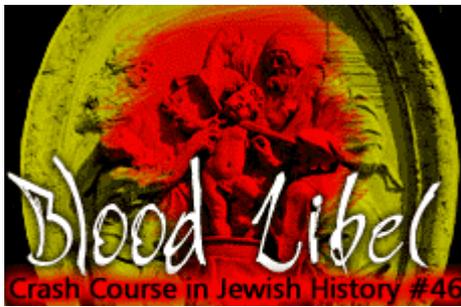
**Readers of this series should understand that this is a history series and as such, it reflects the historical realities of the past. One thousand years ago in Western Europe, there were no evangelicals. The Catholic Church reigned supreme. Superstitious, violent anti-Semitism was rampant and there were no Christian supporters of the Jewish people.**

**Today, thank God, the situation is very different. There are tens of millions of Christians who are good friends of the Jewish people and true supporters of Israel.**

**In no way is the series meant to reflect the modern realities of Jewish-Christian interaction, nor is it meant as an attack against Israel's true friends and allies. My sincere apologies if it was understood to be otherwise.**

Sincerely,

**Rabbi Ken Spiro**



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**Nothing can rationally explain the extreme Christian accusations leveled against the Jews at this time: Jews killed babies and drank their blood!**

We are about to begin discussing an excruciating period of Jewish history that is marked by constant and unrelenting Christian persecution.

During this period we will see:

- the Jews expelled from England (1290)
- the Jews expelled from France (1306 and 1394)
- the Jews expelled from Hungary (1349 and 1360)
- the Jews expelled from Germany (1348 and 1498)
- the Jews expelled from Austria (1421)
- the Jews expelled from Lithuania (1445 and 1495)
- the Jews expelled from Spain (1492)
- the Jews expelled from Portugal (1497)

And that's only a partial list.

(As often as not, the Jews were expelled and then, when a significant economic decline was noted in their absence, they were re-admitted only to be expelled again. It was the classic "can't live with them, can't live without them" philosophy.)

The story of these persecutions really begins around the year 1000 -- the first millennium. It seems that people get nervous about big dates, especially Christians whose Book of Revelations predicts that at the end of a thousand years Satan will be released from prison and then he's going to wreak havoc on the world.

The approaching millennium led to a religious revival in the Christian world which historians call the "New Piety." The New Piety focused especially on the historicity of Jesus. Focusing on the life of Jesus meant focusing on his death. And, even though the Christian "New Testament" says that the Romans killed Jesus, the Jews were blamed for wanting him to die.

And so at this time, we see the notion of Jews as "Christ-killers" -- which first surfaced in the 4th century -- really growing in popularity.

But that alone does not explain the vehemence of Christian persecutions. To fully understand the issue, we have to look at other, more complex reasons.

## **REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY**

To start off, the very existence of the Jews was an irritant to many Christians. And this is why:

Christian theology accepts the Hebrew Bible. It does not quarrel with the statements therein that the Jews were a special people chosen by God to receive the Torah and bring holiness into the world. But Christian theology says that the Jews failed in their mission. This is why God sent His "son" (Jesus) to straighten things out, but the Jews refused to recognize him as "god."

**According to the Church, God abandoned the Jews and replaced them with a "new chosen people": the Christians.**

As a result, God abandoned the Jews and replaced them with the "new chosen people" -- the Christians. (Hence, the Christian segment of the Bible is called the "New Testament" which is Greek for "New Covenant.")

By this line of reasoning however, there would no longer be any purpose for Jews in the world. They should disappear, like did so many mightier peoples. But by the first millennium -- already 1,000 years after the death of Jesus -- the Jews were still all over the place.

Christian theology had to come up with some sort of answer to this problem and it did. The Jews must have been doomed to wander the earth by God as a "witness people" -- *teste veritatis* in Latin. The purpose of a witness people is to survive throughout history to bear witness at the end of days, when Jesus appears again for the so-called "Second Coming."

But the explanations of Christian theology could not remove the sore spot that the presence -- at times, strong and prosperous presence -- of the Jews represented. At the heart of the matter was the Christian view of Judaism as a direct competitor for the soul of humanity.

The hostility that the Christians felt toward the Jews can be seen readily from the writings of the early fathers of the Christian Church. (See *What Did They Think of the Jews?* by Allan Gould, pp. 24-25.)

From John Chrysostom, the Patriarch of Constantinople, we get this:

"Jews are the most worthless of men - they are lecherous, greedy, rapacious - they are perfidious murderers of Christians, they worship the devil, their religion is a sickness ... The Jews are the odious assassins of Christ and for killing god there is no expiation, no indulgence, no pardon. Christians may never cease vengeance. The Jews must live in servitude forever. It is incumbent on all Christians to hate the Jews."

From Gregory of Nyssa, we get more of the same:

"Slayers of the lord, murderers of the prophets, adversaries of god, haters of god, men who show contempt for the law, foes of grace, enemies of the father's faith, advocates of the devil, brood of vipers, slanderers, scoffers, men whose minds are in darkness, leaven of the Pharisees, assembly of demons, sinners, wicked men, stoners and haters of righteousness."

In some places, such calumny incited people to violence.

(We saw in Part 45, for example, how the Crusader mobs devastated the Jewish population of Europe, slaughtering 30%-50% of the Jews living there. Some 10,000 Jews of an estimated population of about 20,000-30,000 were murdered in 1095 as the first Crusade got under way.)

In other places, such calumny bred other forms of persecution.

## **MONEY-LENDERS**

If one were a reasonable Christian listening to one's Church fathers speak of the Jews, one might quite naturally conclude that such a people had no place in a decent society.

And this is a conclusion that was drawn over time.

Around the first millennium, we see the rise of the Christian trade guilds from which Jews were pointedly excluded. No more Jewish goldsmiths and silversmiths and glass-blowers. Jews were also excluded from owning land, holding office, and from being doctors and lawyers.

Jews were forced to wear a "distinguishing garment" -- either a badge or a sign or a silly-looking hat -- which set them apart. This was not only to make them look different but also to humiliate them.

**Jews were forced to wear a "distinguishing garment": either a badge or a sign or a silly-looking hat.**

Then, beginning in 1123, when the bishops of the Church undertook a series of meetings -- called Lateran Councils -- to decide Church policy, the Jews were assigned a new function in Christian society.

Along with a decree that priests must be celibate, the bishops decided that Christians were not allowed to lend each other money. (This came from a misunderstanding of Biblical commandment that forbids one from charging one's brother interest when making a loan.)

As for the Jews, the bishops promulgated a doctrine decreeing them servants of Christians, and then assigning to them the degrading task of lending money -- called usury -- with which the Christians were forbidden to sully their hands.

The bishops were not stupid. They knew that you have to charge interest to have banking, and you had to have banking to have economic development, otherwise there is no growth and your economy stagnates. Someone had to lend money. And that someone, the bishops decided, would be the Jews.

What happened next is that Jews were not allowed to live in various cities in Europe, unless they supplied a certain number of money-lenders.

However, lending money was a very precarious job. For one, it engendered a lot of animosity. After all, who likes to pay back loans?

And what happened if the local nobleman or bishop decided not to pay you back? He'd accused the Jew of doing something terrible -- like killing a Christian baby. That way he could renege on his loans, confiscate all Jewish property, and then expel or even kill the Jews.

This happened over and over again.

Some have claimed that it was Jewish money-lending practices that engendered such actions and, indeed, were responsible for a great deal of anti-Semitism. This is a total myth. At that time Jews charged an average interest rate of 45% on loans. And while this may seem high by today's standards, consider that

the Lombards, the Christian Italian bankers living under the nose of the Vatican, charged rates as high as 250%. So we see that the Lombard money-lending practices were many times worse and yet no one went around persecuting Lombard bankers.

Persecutions of the Jews, on the other hand, knew no bounds.

## **BLOOD LIBEL**

It is next to impossible to explain the accusations that were hurled at the Jews during this time. Jews were persecuted not only for being "Christ-killers" but as "baby-killers."

The first such accusation -- better known as a "blood libel" -- was leveled in 1144 in Norwich, England. There, Jews were charged with kidnapping a Christian baby and draining the baby of blood. The charge became so popular it would sweep, in various forms, through Europe and then spread to other parts of the world.

Now why did Jews need blood in Christian opinion? This is a multiple-choice question:

- a. Jews suffered from hemorrhoids as a punishment for killing Jesus and drinking blood was the best cure for hemorrhoids at the time.
- b. All Jewish men menstruate and need a monthly blood transfusion.
- c. Jewish men, when they're circumcised, lose so much blood because of that surgical procedure that they need to drink Christian babies' blood.
- d. It's the chief ingredient in matzah, and therefore prior to every Passover Jews would be requiring a large supply.
- e. All of the above.

What do you think the correct answer is? Shockingly, it's (e) -- all of the above.

This is a very important lesson in anti-Semitism. You can say anything about the Jews and people will believe it.

It's ironic that Jews, who are prohibited by Jewish law of consuming any blood whatsoever (kosher meat is carefully washed and salted to remove all traces of blood) were precisely the people accused of drinking blood.

The blood libel makes even less sense when you consider that in the 13th century the Church adopted the doctrine of transubstantiation. This is a mystical idea which maintains that when the priest says mass over the wafer and wine, these objects mystically change into the body and blood of Jesus. Christians who consume the wafer and drink the wine are said to be mystically eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking his blood.

It's ironic that the Christian world, while engaged in the ritual of "drinking the blood of Jesus" would accuse the Jews -- who are forbidden to drink blood -- of this totally fabricated hideous crime.

**accusations got even more wild.** But then the accusations got even more wild.

Starting in Switzerland and Germany in the 13th century, Jews were accused of kidnapping communion wafers from churches. Why would the Jews do this in

Christian view?

To torture it.

Medieval documents tell stories describing how a Jew (usually called Abraham) steals a wafer from a church, sticks a knife in it, and blood starts pouring out. And then he cuts it up into pieces and sends it to different Jews who all torture it.

This would be funny, if not for a fact that thousands of Jews were slaughtered as a result of such stories. For example, the entire Jewish community of Berlitz, near Berlin in Germany, was all burned alive based on the accusation of torturing a wafer!

(To read more about this subject see *The Devil and the Jew* by Joshua Trachtenburg or "*Why the Jews?*" by Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin.)

## **JEW TAXES**

Throughout this time, the Jews were physically marginalized -- beaten, burned, raped. And they were economically marginalized -- pillaged, robbed, taxed nearly to death. Indeed, their money was one of the reasons they were tolerated at all. Jews were a good source of income to the crown. They were specially taxed with special punitive "Jew taxes."

We will see later in Germany that 38 special taxes were imposed on the Jews. There was a tax to be born, a tax to die, a tax to wear a kippah, a tax to be married, a tax to be circumcised, a tax to buy Shabbat candles, a tax to exempt you from the German army in which you were not allowed to serve anyway because you were a Jew. If you want to know why Jews are so good at evading taxes and why so many Jews are into accounting, it comes from literally 1,500 years of trying to stay alive not being taxed to death by their enemies.

And what would happen eventually, once Jews were drained of their money they would be expelled.

This is what happened in England where heavy taxing of the Jewish population of 5,000 people supplied the crown with 20% of all of its income.

In 1290 -- on the 9th day of Av, which is the same day that the Temple in Jerusalem was twice destroyed, and which is therefore the worst day in Jewish history -- the Jews were expelled from England and not permitted to return for almost four centuries.

Other countries would soon follow suit, but first would come another twist in the persecution of the Jews.

**NEXT: THE BLACK DEATH**

**Note:**

[HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)  
I have received a lot of feedback from Christian readers regarding the topic of Medieval anti-Semitism. Most of the comments come

from evangelical Christians who claim that those who persecuted Jews in the Middle Ages were not really true Christians and that I shouldn't lump all Christians together.

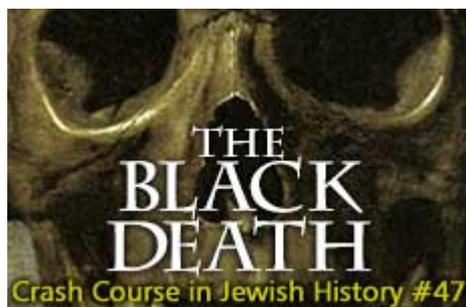
Readers of this series should understand that this is a history series and as such, it reflects the historical realities of the past. One thousand years ago in Western Europe, there were no evangelicals. The Catholic Church reigned supreme. Superstitious, violent anti-Semitism was rampant and there were no Christian supporters of the Jewish people.

Today, thank God, the situation is very different. There are tens of millions of Christians who are good friends of the Jewish people and true supporters of Israel.

In no way is the series meant to reflect the modern realities of Jewish-Christian interaction, nor is it meant as an attack against Israel's true friends and allies. My sincere apologies if it was understood to be otherwise.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Ken Spiro



**Although the Europeans didn't know what brought on the bubonic plague, they had no trouble naming the cause -- it had to be the Jews!**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In the 14th century the bubonic plague -- known as the "Black Death" -- hit Europe. At that time, people had no idea of the causes of diseases and no idea that lack of hygiene caused the spread of bacteria.

Some historians have cynically pointed out that bathing defined the difference between the Classical Age and the Dark Ages. The Greeks and Romans were very clean people and public baths were everywhere. Medieval Europeans, on the other hand, didn't bathe at all. Sometimes they didn't change their clothes for an entire year. The tailors or seamstresses would literally stitch new clothes onto people around Easter-time and that was it for the year. They kept their windows closed because they taught that disease traveled through the air -- something they called "bad ether."

Needless to say, when any new disease arrived in Europe, the unsanitary conditions helped it spread. And so it happened with the "Black Death" -- a bacteria carried by flea-ridden rats.

The bubonic plague is estimated to have killed up to half the population of Europe -- about 25 million people.

**The bubonic  
plague killed up  
to half the**

**population of Europe -- about 25 million people.** Although they didn't know what caused the disease, the Europeans had no trouble figuring it out -- it had to be the Jews! The Jews must be getting poison from the devil and pouring it down the wells of Christians (or throwing it into the air) to kill them all off.

To be fair, the Church said this was not so, but the masses didn't hear it. The Church's message that the Jews killed "god" but meant no harm to the Christian world just didn't add up.

During the time of the bubonic plague (chiefly 1348-1349), you had massacres of Jews in various European communities. For example, Jews of Strasbourg were burned alive. The collection of documents of Jewish history, *Scattered Among the Nations* (edited by Alexis Rubin) contains this account:

"On Saturday that was St. Valentine's Day, they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about 2,000 of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. Everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled..."

(Note in particular the last sentence above.)

When we look at these ridiculous accusations against the Jews, we have to keep in mind that they are not limited to the Dark Ages. The ignorant superstitious masses of Medieval Europe were not the only ones to believe such things. We see this phenomenon in every age including the 20th century.

For example, an aid to the Mayor of Chicago said in 1990 that the reason why the black community has such high instances of AIDS was because Jewish doctors deliberately put it in their blood supply. The Palestinian Authority has said the same thing several times. The PA has made other outrageous accusations against Israel such as that the Israeli Government puts hormones in all the wheat sold to Gaza to turn all Arab women into prostitutes and poisons the chewing gum sold to Arab children. In front of Hilary Clinton, Yassir Arafat's wife said that Jews were poisoning the Palestinian water supply.

Professor Michael Curtis of Rutgers University summed it up perfectly: "Anything and everything is a reason to hate the Jew. Whatever you hate, the Jew is that."

## **GHETTO**

Needless to say, when you think a people are capable of poisoning your wells, you do not want them anywhere near you.

Indeed, as part of the general physical and economic isolation of the Jews throughout the 11th to the 16th centuries (which we covered in Part 46), there were created special areas for Jews to live. These were called "ghettos" -- a name of Italian origin. The Italian word *ghetto* means "foundry" or "ironworks," and refers to a place where metal was smelted -- a really disgusting smelly part of town, full of smoke and polluted water. In other words, the perfect place for undesirable people.

**It was a place that  
was in a**

**disgusting smelly part of town -- perfect for undesirable people.** Although the term ghetto as a place for the Jews was first used in Venice in 1516, the herding of Jews into areas specifically designated for them began several hundred years earlier. These areas were usually fenced off by a moat or a hedge to designate its boundaries. Jews were allowed outside during the day hours, but at night they had to stay in.

The ghetto was a mixed blessing for the Jews. While they were kept apart from the rest of society, which was humiliating, they were also kept together. Living together helped them to preserve a sense of community and, since there was no socializing with non-Jews, it was also a guard against assimilation.

The worst part of living in the ghetto was that whenever the masses got it in their heads to kill the Jews -- as they often did around Easter time -- they knew exactly where to find them.

The Christians always did offer the Jews a way out of the ghetto -- through conversion to Christianity.

## **NACHMANIDES**

It was during one of these efforts to get the Jews to convert to Christianity that the great Kabbalist and Torah-Talmud scholar known as Nachmanides came to prominence.

Nachmanides, Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, better known as Ramban (not to be confused with Rambam or Maimonides) was born in Christian Barcelona in 1194. He became the defender of the Jews in the great Disputation of 1263 -- the most famous of the debates in which the Christians attempted to prove to Jews their religion was wrong in order to get them to convert.

Jews tried to avoid these debates like the plague. Every debate was a no-win situation as Jews were not allowed to make Christianity look bad in any way -- in other words, Jews were not allowed to win.

In 1263, a debate was staged in front of the Spanish King James of Aragon, and Nachmanides was given the royal permission to speak without fear of retribution. Nachmanides took full advantage of this and didn't mince any words.

His opponent was a Jew who had converted to Christianity named Pablo Christiani (a name he adopted after his conversion). As we will see later in history, there were no bigger anti-Semites than those Jews who were trying to out-Christian the Christians. In fact, it was Pablo's idea to challenge the great scholar to this debate, which is a little bit like a high school physics teacher challenging Einstein. Realizing that Pablo might need some help, the Church sent the generals of the Dominican and Franciscan orders as his advisors. But even they couldn't stand up to Nachmanides.

The debate revolved around three questions:

1. Has the Messiah come, as the Christians say, or has he yet to come as the Jews say?
2. Is the Messiah divine, as the Christians say, or human as the Jews say?
3. Do the Jews practice the true law or do the Christians?

Nachmanides answered that had the Messiah come the Biblical prophecies of his coming would have been fulfilled. Since the lion wasn't lying down with the lamb and peace did not rule the planet, clearly the

Messiah had not come. Indeed, noted Nachmanides, "from the time of Jesus until the present the world has been filled with violence and injustice, and the Christians have shed more blood than other peoples."

As for the divinity of Jesus, Nachmanides said that it was just impossible for any Jew to believe that "the Creator of heaven and earth resorted to the womb of a certain Jewish woman ... and was born an infant ... and then was betrayed into the hands of his enemies and sentenced to death ... The mind of a Jew, or any other person, cannot tolerate this."

**The Church ordered Nachmanides to be tried on the charge of blasphemy, and he was forced to leave Spain.**

At the end of the debate, which was interrupted as the Church scrambled to minimize the damage, the king said, "I have never seen a man support a wrong cause so well," and gave Nachmanides 300 *solidos* (pieces of gold) and the promise of continued immunity.

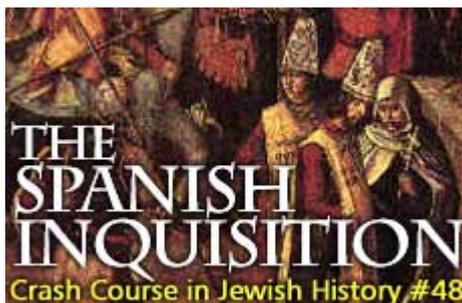
Unfortunately, the promise did not hold. The Church ordered Nachmanides to be tried on the charge of blasphemy, and he was forced to leave Spain. In 1267, he arrived in Jerusalem, where there were so few Jews at the time that he could not find ten men for a *minyán* in order to pray.

Determined to set up a synagogue, he sent to Hebron and imported a couple of Jews. His original synagogue was outside the city walls on Mount Zion, though after his death in 1270 it was moved inside. (After the 1967 Six-Day War, the synagogue -- which in the meantime had been turned into a dumpsite -- was restored and is a vibrant place of worship today. Incidentally, the Ramban Synagogue is a subterranean synagogue because at the time Muslim law forbid any Jewish place of worship to be taller than any Muslim place of worship, as we saw in Part 42).

Meanwhile, back in Europe, the Church was still trying to undo the damage of Nachmanides' tour de force. The consequences unfortunately were not good for the Jews.

For one, the Church ordered a censorship of all Jewish books containing any anti-Christian references. In any such books were found -- without the pages ripped out or otherwise obliterated -- they were burned.

For another, Pope Clement IV issued a special document, called a papal bull, titled *Turbato Corde*, which later became the basis for the Inquisition policy for persecuting "Judaizers" as we shall see in the next installment.



**The basic accusation of the Inquisition was that Jews who converted to Christianity were still secretly Jewish.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In Part 45, when we discussed the Crusades, we covered the war of the Church against the Muslims in the Middle East. Now we turn to the war of the Church against Muslims in Europe. This war went on for quite

some time in fits and starts -- from the time the Muslim Moors arrived in Spain in 711. It took a long time for the Christians to vanquish them. The first Muslim stronghold to fall was Toledo in 1085; the last was Granada in 1492.

As soon as the Christian conquest began, things turned very bad for the Jews.

In their blood-thirsty vengeance against the Muslims, the Spanish Christians included the Jews, whom they put in the category of infidels.

In Barcelona, for example, the whole Jewish community was murdered by a rioting mob. First given shelter by some Christians, these Jews were pressured to convert. Those who did not were refused protection.

Writes Professor B. Netanyahu in his 1,400-page work, *The Origins of the Inquisition*, quoting an eyewitness account of the time:

"Those of them who refused to accept baptism were immediately slain, and their corpses, stretched in the streets and the squares, offered a horrendous spectacle." (p. 159)

Just how many Jews converted in these forced mass conversions that accompanied the Christian conquest of Spain? Estimates range between tens of thousands to as many as 600,000. (See *The Origins of the Inquisition*, p. 1095.)

Many of those who converted did so only outwardly, continuing to practice Judaism in secret. In due time, the Christians caught on to these phony conversions and decided to root out the heretics.

## **THE SPANISH INQUISITION**

The Inquisition we are going to cover now is the Spanish Inquisition, which began officially by papal bull issued by Pope Sixtus IV on November 1, 1478.

(We should note, however, that the very first Inquisition actually took place in 1233 under orders from Pope Gregory IX to combat a group of French-Christian heretics called "Albigenses." This first Inquisition was relatively mild and did not as a rule sentence people to death. Not so the Spanish Inquisition which was directed against Jewish heretics.)

Unlike its earlier version, the Spanish Inquisition sought to punish Jews who had converted to Christianity but were not really "sincere" in their conversions.

There is a great deal of irony in this. First you tell people they have to convert or die, then, when they do convert, you decide to kill them anyway because their conversions are not "sincere."

**Derogatorily,  
Jewish converts  
to Christianity  
were called  
marranos,  
meaning "pigs."**

There was another reason for the Inquisition, which had little to do with the sincerity of conversions. Once Jews converted to Christianity they had an open access to the playing field, economically and politically. And, of course, they prospered mightily. That engendered a lot of hostility from the Christians - a pattern we have seen in Jewish history ever since the enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians.

The Christians began to call converted Jews "New Christians" to distinguish them from the "Old Christians" i.e. themselves. Derogatorily, Jewish converts to Christianity were called *conversos* meaning "converts," or worse yet *marranos*, meaning "pigs."

The basic accusation was that these Jews were not real converts to Christianity - they were secretly practicing Judaism. That was certainly often the case. There were large numbers of Jews who would be outwardly Christian but who would continue to practice Judaism secretly.

Until this day, there exist Christian communities with clear Jewish roots dating back to this time. There are people in the United States (in New England, New Mexico and Arizona) as well as in South and Central America, who are descended from Spanish or Portuguese settlers, and who have strange customs they cannot explain. For example, even though they are Catholics, on Friday night they go down to the cellar to light candles. They don't know the origins of the custom, but they do it. These people are clearly descended from Jews who pretended to be Christians and yet were practicing Jewish rituals in secret.

The job of the Inquisition was to find such people, torture them until they admitted their "crime," and then kill them.

## **FERDINAND AND ISABELLA**

Every American child knows about King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella - they are the monarchs who backed Christopher Columbus in his discovery of America. However, here are a few things that most people don't know about them.

The marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469 unified Spain, in some measure making the final victory over the Muslims possible. Prior to their reign, Spain was a collection of provinces - the two primary being Aragon and Castile. When Ferdinand of Aragon married Isabella of Castile, these two provinces were united into a mighty kingdom.

Isabella was a "fervent" Christian and, in 1478, she asked the Pope for permission to set up an Inquisition to weed out heresy in the Christian world. The Pope obliged, issuing on November 1, 1478, a papal bull called *Exigit Sincere Devotionis*. Ferdinand and Isabella followed that up with a royal decree on September 27, 1480.

One might think that ridding Christianity of heretics should involve targeting other groups, not just false Jewish converts. However, the royal decree mentioned no one else. Writes Professor B. Netanyahu (p.3):

"The royal decree explicitly stated that the Inquisition was instituted to search out and punish converts from Judaism who transgressed against Christianity by secretly adhering to Jewish beliefs and performing rites and ceremonies of the Jews. No other group was mentioned, no other purpose indicated - a fact that in itself

suggest a close relationship between the creation of the Inquisition and Jewish life in Spain. Other facts, too, attest to that relationship."

Although the first inquisitors got to work a few months after the decree, it was not until 1487 -- when Tom?s de Torquemada, a Spanish Dominican monk, was appointed Grand Inquisitor -- that the Inquisition got its bloody reputation. Torquemada - who was descended from Jewish converts to Christianity some time back (though he certainly did not have a Jewish mother) - outdid the worst anti-Semites with his brutality.

How did the Inquisition work?

Jewish *conversos* would be arrested and accused of not being true Christians. They wouldn't even know who was accusing them; evidence would be presented against them in secret. Then they would be tortured until they confessed to being heretics. Then, once they confessed, they would be killed. The usual form was burning at the stake, though if they were willing to kiss the cross, they would be spared the horrible pain of burning and would be strangled instead.

The key point is that it really didn't matter if they repented - they died either way.

**It really didn't matter if the Jews repented - they died either way.**

What if some people refused to confess even under torture? Or worse, what if some people admitted right away to practicing Judaism secretly, but even when tortured refused to concede the truth of Christianity? If they survived the horrendous tortures, they would be burned at the stake in a ceremony called *auto-da-fe* meaning "act of faith."

This went on until 1834 when the Inquisition was finally abolished, by which time every Spaniard came to fear its power. By then the Inquisition's field of operations had spread to Christian heretics, Protestant sects, witches, and even people who read the wrong books. The Spanish Inquisition was not the only Inquisition, because as the Jewish *conversos* fled to other more friendly countries, the Inquisition followed them, even as far as Brazil, where the last person was burned at the stake in the 19th century.

## EXPULSION

The year 1492 marked the fall of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold on the Iberian Peninsula, bringing to an end the Muslim domination of Spain which had lasted nearly 800 years. Spain returned to being a completely Christian country.

Shortly thereafter, Ferdinand and Isabella, decided to throw all the Jews out of Spain. This time, in the expulsion edict, the monarchs were not targeting Jewish converts to Christianity, rather they were targeting Jews who had never converted. Why? One factor that certainly played a big role (besides anti-Semitism) was that Jewish money was now needed to rebuild the kingdom after the costly war against the Muslims. Rather than slowly squeezing the money out of the Jews through taxation, it was easier to expel them all at once and confiscate the wealth and property they would leave behind.

The Jews tried to get the edict reversed, of course. The key player in the drama was Don Isaac Abravanel -- who was a great Torah scholar and rabbi. He was one of the great Jewish personalities of this period of time, and had served as the treasurer of Spain, thus being the most powerful Jew in Spain. He tried very hard to rescind the expulsion order, at one point offering the monarchs 300,000 *ducats* for a reprieve.

He actually won a delay, but his success only ignited the ire of the Grand Inquisitor Tomas de Torquemada.

Torquemada - who had an enormous amount of influence over the Queen Isabella, being her confessor - walked in while Abravanel was pleading his cause. Incensed, he threw the cross at the Queen, hitting her in the head and yelled: "Judas sold his master (Jesus) for 30 pieces of silver. Now you would sell him anew!"

And so Don Isaac Abravanel lost. But he was so important to the monarchs that they gave him a special dispensation to stay; they even agreed that another nine Jews could stay with him so he could pray with a *minyan*. He refused. In fact, he became the leader of the Jews of Spain as they went into exile.

Now, on what day was the Jewish community sent into exile? August 2, 1492. This day just happened to be the 9th of Av, the same date as the destruction of the first and second Temple in Jerusalem (and many other disasters as we have already seen). On that day the Jews of Spain (some 150,000 - 200,000 people) were forced to abandon their vast possessions and leave. The remainder (around 60,000 though it's unknown exactly how many) stayed, agreeing to convert.

## CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

The day after the expulsion, August 3, 1492, Christopher Columbus left on his famed voyage of discovery. His diary begins:

"In the same month in which their Majesties issued the edit that all Jews should be driven out of the kingdom and its territories, in the same month, they gave me the order to undertake with sufficient men my expedition of discovery of the Indies."

Many people like to speculate that Columbus was a Jew, and there is a good case for it. (For those interested, there are a lot of fascinating tidbits about Columbus collected in a book called *Christopher Columbus's Jewish Connection* by Jane Francis Amler.) Here are some examples:

- Although he was born in Genoa, Italy, his first language was Castilian Spanish. Many Jews had been forced to leave Castile about hundred years before his birth and some went to Genoa. (Incidentally, 14th century Castilian Spanish is the "Yiddish" of Spanish Jewry known as "Ladino.")
- When he wrote, Columbus made funny little marks on the page that resembled the markings that religious Jews put on top of the written page even to this day - an abbreviation of *besiyata d'ishmaya*, which means "with God's help" in Aramaic.
- He talked a great deal about Zion in his writings.
- In his crew, he had five known Jews, including his doctor, navigator, and translator.
- Columbus hired the translator, Louis de Torres, (who had converted to Christianity the day before) because he spoke twelve languages including Hebrew. And Columbus was sure he was not going to bump into Hebrew-speakers. He thought he was going to go to the Far East and he expected to find at least one of the ten lost tribes there and needed a Hebrew speaker.

Furthermore, there's no question that Columbus's voyage to America was spiritually linked to the expulsion. Just as one of the greatest Jewish communities of Medieval Europe is being destroyed, God was opening up the doors of what is going to eventually become the greatest refuge for Jews in history -- America. This is another tremendous pattern we see in history: God making the cure before the disease.

Incidentally, Columbus's voyage was not financed by Isabella selling her jewels as is often stated. The major financiers were two court officials - both Jewish *conversos* - Louis de Santangel, chancellor of the royal household, and Gabriel Sanchez, treasurer of Aragon.

**The major financiers of Columbus were two court officials, both Jewish *conversos*.**

The first letter Columbus sent back from the New World was not to Ferdinand and Isabella, but to Santangel and Sanchez thanking them for their support and telling them what he found.

The voyage of Columbus is a landmark in the Age of Exploration when numerous discoverers opened up the New World. While no other is believed to be Jewish, their discoveries were, to a significant extent, made possible by Jewish inventions or Jewish improvements to existing inventions.

For example, the key tools of navigators -- the quadrant and the astrolabe - were of Jewish manufacture. In fact, the type of quadrant then in use was called "Jacob's Staff"; it had been invented by Rabbi Levi ben Gershon also known as Gershonides.

The famous atlas that Columbus and the other explorers used was known as the Catalan Atlas. It was the creation of the Crasca Family, Jews from Majorca, Spain. Not only was the Catalan Atlas considered the greatest and most significant collection of maps at the time, it had no competition to speak of. Jews had a virtual monopoly at map making then, culling information from Jewish merchants from all over the known world.

## **A BLESSING**

While Columbus was off discovering America, what was happening to the Jews newly thrown out of Spain?

Most made their way across the border to Portugal, but their stay there was short-lived. Five years later, Portugal offered them the same choice as Spain: "convert, leave or die."

Thousands went to Turkey, which historically has been very nice to the Jews. Opening his doors to them, the Sultan of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, Bayezid II, declared: "They tell me that Ferdinand of Spain is a wise man but he is a fool. For he takes his treasure and sends it all to me."

How did the movement of the Jews affect these countries? Spain, after some good years, went into a tremendous decline. Turkey, on the other hand, prospered. The Ottoman Empire became one of the greatest powers in the world. The next two sultans, Selim I and Suleiman I, expanded the empire as far as Vienna, Austria.

(Incidentally, it was Suleiman -- known as "Suleiman the Magnificent" -- who re-built the walls of Jerusalem - the same walls that stand today and define the Old City.)

If we recall the lesson of Part 4, God had given Abraham and his descendants a special blessing:

*"I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and through you, will be blessed all the families of the earth."* (Genesis 12:3)

God said to Abraham that he and his descendants -- the Jews -- would be under God's protection. The nations and peoples who would be good to the Jews will do well. Empires and peoples that would be bad to the Jews will do poorly.

That is one of the great patterns of history that we have seen and that we will continue to see in future installments. You can literally chart the rise and fall of virtually all the countries in the Middle East and the Western world by how they treated the Jews.

One such country, surprisingly, was Poland.



**King Boleslav of Poland invited the Jews, granting them unprecedented rights and privileges.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The period of history we are looking at is known as the Renaissance which historians generally date from about 1350 to about 1650. Renaissance means "rebirth." Rebirth of what? Of knowledge.

We have now left the Dark Ages dominated by the repressive policies of the Church in Rome and are beginning a time period associated with individual expression, self-consciousness, and worldly experience, and accomplishments in scholarship, literature, science, and the arts.

In the Renaissance, we see some powerful kings emerging in England and in France, while the power of the Church begins to wane. The famous personalities of this period of time are Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Petrarch, Rabelais, Descartes, Copernicus, just to name a few.

This is also a time when Jews made their way into Poland. Today we tend to think of Jewish life in Poland as being confined to the *shtetl*, but that did not happen until the 18th century. We also tend to think of Poland as synonymous with anti-Semitism, pogroms, etc. But during the time of the Renaissance the picture was quite different.

**The places where the Jews will do the best are in the end the places where the Jews suffer the worst.** Before we begin the fascinating story of the Jews of Poland, we have to keep in mind the historical pattern that we see constantly in Jewish history. The places where the Jews will do the best are almost always the places where the Jews will suffer the worst in the end. You'd expect there'd be places that would be good for the Jews and other places where Jews would have a rough time. But that's not what happens.

The best of times and the worst of times tend to happen in the same place. We just saw it in Spain, we're going to see it now in Poland, we'll see it later in Germany. It's one of the great patterns in Jewish history ever since the Jews were invited into Egypt and then enslaved there.

So how did the Jews come to Poland?

## A POLISH INVITATION

Poland became Christian very late, only at the turn of the 11th century, and only then did it join the European community of nations (so to speak). After that, it took a couple of hundred years before Poland started to emerge as a nation-state with strong development potential.

If you want to develop your country economically and culturally, who do you need?

You need Jews.

Why were the Jews so necessary? First, they could read and write. Jews were always highly educated as they had to be literate to read and obey the Torah, and general education came along as part of the parcel. Second, Jews were excellent bankers, accountants, and administrators who knew how to keep the economy healthy.

So in 1264, King Boleslav of Poland granted a charter inviting the Jews there. The charter was an amazing document, granting Jews unprecedented rights and privileges. For example, it stated that:

- "The testimony of the Christian alone may not be admitted in a matter which concerns the money or property of a Jew. In every such incidence there must be the testimony of both a Christian and a Jew. If a Christian injures a Jew in any which way, the accused shall pay a fine to the royal treasury."
- "If a Christian desecrates or defiles a Jewish cemetery in any which way, it is our wish that he be punished severely as demanded by law."
- "If a Christian should attack a Jew, the Christian shall be punished as required by the laws of this land. We absolutely forbid anyone to accuse the Jews in our domain of using the blood of human beings."
- "We affirm that if any Jew cry out in the night as a result of violence done to him, and if his Christian neighbors fail to respond to his cries and do not bring the necessary help, they shall be fined."
- "We also affirm that Jews are free to buy and sell all manner of things just as Christians, and if anyone hampers them, he shall pay a fine."

This was an amazing document. We saw previously that Jews ([see Part 46](#)) would be brought in as money-lenders (being excluded from other professions), then when a bishop or nobleman wanted his debt annulled, he brought a "blood libel" against the Jews and had them expelled or killed. King Boleslav boldly promised the Jews that this would not happen in Poland.

Jews did not immediately flock into Poland, though some did settle there to test the waters. But when other countries started expelling Jews -- England being the first in 13th century and Italy and Portugal being the more recent in the 15th century (as we saw in Parts 46 and 48) -- Poland became an attractive destination point.

Then in 1569, Poland unified with Lithuania, and as a result expanded its borders to the east. What we know as the Ukraine today and some of Belorussia, became vassal lands of Poland which was still a semi-feudal country. These lands needed to be managed and job openings in administration (at which Jews excelled) sprung up everywhere.

Another Polish king, Sigismund II Augustus, issued another invitation. Here is an excerpt from his edict, granting the Jews permission to open a yeshiva at Lublin, dated August 23, 1567:

"As a result of the efforts of our advisors and in keeping with the request of the Jews of Lublin we do hereby grant permission to erect a yeshiva and to outfit said yeshiva with all that is required to advance learning. All the learned men and rabbis of Lublin shall come together for among their number they shall choose one to serve as the head of the yeshiva. Let their choice be a man who will magnify Torah and bring it glory."

## **GOLDEN AGE OF POLISH JEWRY**

In Poland, the Jews were allowed to have their own governing body called the *Va'ad Arba Artzot*, which was composed of various rabbis who oversaw the affairs of the Jews in eastern Europe. The Poles did not interfere with Jewish life and scholarship flourished.

Some important personalities of this period, which a student of Jewish history should remember, were:

- Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1525-1572), from Krakow, also known as the Rema. After the Sephardi rabbi Joseph Karo wrote the *Shulchan Aruch*, the code of Jewish Law, Rabbi Isserles annotated it to fill in the rabbinic decisions from Eastern Europe. His commentary was, and continues to be, critically important in daily Jewish life.
- Rabbi Ya'akov Pollack (1455-1530), from Krakow. He opened the first yeshivah in Poland and was later named the chief rabbi of Poland. He developed a method of learning Talmud called *pilpul*, meaning "fine distinctions." This was a type of dialectical reasoning that became very popular, whereby contradictory facts or ideas were systematically weighed with a view to the resolution of their real or apparent contradictions.
- Rabbi Yehudah Loewe, (1526-1609), not from Poland but important to Eastern European Jewry. He was known as the Maharal of Prague and was one of the great mystical scholars of his time. He has been credited with having created the *golem*, a Frankenstein figure, a living being without soul.

## **POPULATION BOOM**

Along with the growth in Torah scholarship came population growth. In 1500 there were about 50,000 Jews living in Poland. By 1650 there were 500,000 Jews. This means that by the mid 17th century about 30% of the Jewish population of the world was living in Poland!

Where did these Jews settle within Poland?

Jews were generally urban people as they were historically not allowed to own land in most of the places they lived. However, they also created their own farm communities called *shtetls*. Although we tend to think of the *shtetl* today as a poor farming village (like in *Fiddler on the Roof*), during the Golden Age of Polish Jewry, many of these communities were actually quite prosperous. And there were thousands of them.

**The Jews in these  
independent  
communities  
spoke their own**

**language called** The Jews in these independent communities spoke their own language called Yiddish.

**Yiddish.** Original Yiddish was written in Hebrew letters and was a mixture of Hebrew, Slavic, and German. (Note that Yiddish underwent constant development and "modern"

Yiddish is not like the "old" Yiddish which first appeared in the 13th century, nor "middle" Yiddish of this period of time.)

Overall, the Jews did well, but working alongside Polish and Ukrainian Christians (who thought Jews killed Jesus) had its downside.

There were several instances of Christian rioting against Jews. For example, in 1399 in Poznan, a rabbi and 13 elders were accused of stealing Church property and they were tortured and burnt at the stake. (The Poles must have forgot the king's edict.)

Another problem was that Jews worked as administrators and tax collectors for Polish feudal lords. This did not make them popular among the local folk, who needed little encouragement to unleash their anti-Semitic rage.

This was especially true in places like the Ukraine, where the Catholic Poles were viewed as an occupying power in an Eastern Orthodox land, and the Jews -- being representatives of the occupation forces -- were the easiest to resent.

And while the Polish nobility might have needed the Jews, the common Poles didn't. There were instances when the Polish soldiers would purposely leave town, abandoning the Jews to the mercy (or lack thereof) of the Ukrainians. This happened, for example, in 1648 in the city of Tulchin. The Polish soldiers made a deal with the Cossacks and left town. The Jews defended the city by themselves until it fell and they were all slaughtered.

## POGROMS

When the Ukrainians decided to throw the Poles out of their land, a full-scale massacres of Jews began.

The year 1635 saw the first big explosion of violence in Ukraine against Poles and Jews. But this attempt at the revolution was crushed. It returned with new vigor thirteen years later.

This second rebellion, in 1648, which succeeded in freeing Ukraine from Polish rule, was led by a Ukrainian Cossack named Bogdan Chmielnicki. In large measure it was directed at the Jews.

Chmielnicki was one of the biggest anti-Semites in human history, on par with Hitler.

**Chmielnicki was** His aim was genocide and his forces murdered an estimated 100,000 Jews in the most horrendous ways:

**one of the biggest**

**anti-Semites in**

**human history,**

**on par with**

**Hitler.**

Here is one description (from *Yeven Mezulah*, pp. 31-32):

"Some of them [the Jews] had their skins flayed off them and their flesh was flung to the dogs. The hands and feet of others were cut off and they [their bodies] were flung onto the roadway where carts ran over them and they were trodden underfoot by

horse ... And many were buried alive. Children were slaughtered at their mother's bosoms and many children were torn apart like fish. They ripped up the bellies of pregnant women, took out the unborn

children, and flung them in their faces. They tore open the bellies of some of them and placed a living cat within the belly and they left them alive thus, first cutting off their hands so that they should not be able to take the living cat out of the belly ... and there was never an unnatural death in the world that they did not inflict upon them."

Here is another account from a Luthuanian Rabbi Shabbetai ben Meir HaCohen (1621-1662) also known as the Shach, who survived this time:

"On the same day 1,500 people were killed in the city of Human in Russia on the Sabbath. The nobles [Cossacks] with whom the wicked mob had again made an alliance chased all the Jews from the city into the fields and vineyards where the villains surrounded them in a circle, stripped them to their skin and ordered them to lie on the ground. The villains spoke to the Jews with friendly and consoling words: 'Why do you want to be killed, strangled and slaughtered like an offering to your God Who poured out His anger upon you without mercy? Would it not be safer for you to worship our gods, our images and crosses and we would form one people which would unite together.' "But the holy and faithful people who so often allowed themselves to be murdered for the sake of the Lord, raised their voices together in almighty in Heaven and cried: 'Hear of Israel the Lord our God, the Holy One and the King of the Universe, we have been murdered for Thy sake so often already. O Lord God of Israel let us remain faithful to Thee.' Afterward they recited the confession of sins and said: 'We are guilty and thus recognize the Divine judgement.' Now the villains turned upon them and there was not one of them who did not fall victim."

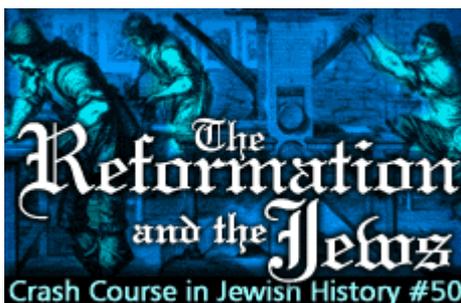
It's no wonder when Jews hear the word Cossack they break out in a sweat. These people killed 100,000 Jews and destroyed 300 Jewish communities in the most brutal way one could imagine.

Yet to this day Chmielnicki is considered a nationalist hero in the Ukraine, where they regard him as a kind of "George Washington." In Kiev there is a big statue in the square erected in his honor.

So this is how, in 1648-1649, the Golden Age of Polish Jewry came crashing down.

These pogroms took place in Eastern Poland, and the Jews in other parts remained there. Poland continued for many years to be the center of the Ashkenazi Jewish world as we shall see in future installments.

However, before we cover that period of time, we will backtrack a bit to talk about the Protestant Reformation which also took place during the Renaissance.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The Reformation exposed the corruption of the Church and brought about the advent of Protestantism. For the Jews it just meant more bad news.**

Jewish history did not happen in a vacuum, and we have to always keep in mind the events going on in the world at large that impacted the Jews in a major way. One of those huge events that shook up Europe was the Protestant Reformation.

What brought it about?

Simply put, the corruption of the Church in Rome.

As we saw in [Part 45](#), with the decline of the Roman Empire, the Church became the great feudal player in the economic system of Europe. This was a system that, while virtually enslaving huge masses of people, made the Church very rich and very powerful - both politically and militarily.

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," said Lord Acton, and this was certainly true of the Church at this time.

Rolling in wealth, the Church built great edifices and fielded its own armies and sank deeper and deeper into immorality, materialism, and decadence.

The list of papal affairs and political intrigues is extensive. For example, Pope Alexander VI bribed some members of the college of cardinals to insure his election in 1492, the year the Jews were thrown out of Spain. [*History of Christianity*, Paul Johnson, p. 280, 363] Once in office, he brought the papacy to new heights of spiritual laxity.

**A number of popes had abandoned celibacy, but Alexander VI openly flaunted his reputation as a great lover.** A number of popes before him had abandoned celibacy, but Alexander VI openly flaunted his reputation as a great lover. He had a portrait of his mistress - dressed up like Mary, the mother of Jesus - painted over the door in his bedroom, and he publicly acknowledged his illegitimate children, who became famous in their own right, Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia. [*Chronicle of the World*, Derrik Mercer ed., DK Publishing, p.391]

Giovanni Boccaccio, the great 14th century Italian humanist writer offers us a humorous insight into the corruption and decadence of the Church of his day. In his classic work, *Decameron*, a Jew by the name of Abraham is convinced by a Christian friend to visit Rome in the hope that he will be so impressed that he will convert to Christianity. Abraham returns disgusted and reports:

"I say this for that, if I was able to observe aright, no piety, no devoutness, no good work or example of life or other what did I see there in any who was Churchman: nay lust, covetise, gluttony and the like and worse ... And as far as I judge, meseemeth your chief pastor and consequently all others endeavor with all diligence and all their wit and every art to bring to nought and to banish from the world the [values of the] Christian religion ..."

## DANGEROUS BOOK

Those wanting to reform the moral stature of the Church were powerless. Even as the hypocrisy of the situation was becoming intolerable, the Church used its power to stifle any signs of defiance.

**The Church did not want common people reading the Bible.**

The defiance began in the 14th century with challenges to Church doctrine and attempts at translating the Bible into languages other than Latin (the language of the Roman Empire which few spoke). These attempts were brutally put down.

Why didn't the Church want the common people to read the Bible?

Just imagine what might happen if the serfs should get a hold of a Bible and find out what it actually said about the obligations of every person (even "his lordship" and "his eminence") of loving his neighbor and of treating him with equality since *all* human beings were created in the image of God.

It is precisely for this reason that the Church refrained from translating the Bible into the vernacular. Writes Henry Phelps-Brown in *Egalitarianism and the Generation of Inequality* (p. 68):

"Despite its anxiety to save man's souls from the perdition of earthly pursuits in order to preserve it for the salvation of the life after death, the medieval Church insulated pupils from the dangerous contamination of Scriptures. Only those entering holy orders were allowed to study theology and delve into Holy Writ. Unsupervised, independent exploration of the Bible was tantamount to heresy and only clerics in good standing were permitted to expound Scripture from a Latin text incomprehensible to the Christian masses."

## MARTIN LUTHER

In 1506, the Church of Rome undertook one of its grandest and most expensive projects - the building of a new St. Peter's Basilica as the centerpiece of the Vatican. The Church was to be so lavish and so huge that, when completed 150 years later, it was the largest Church ever built and it remained so until 1989.

Such an astronomical project would take an astronomical sum of money, and, as a source of fund-raising, the Church turned to the sale of indulgences.

The practice of granting indulgences - remission of punishment for sins through the intercession of the Church - already had a long history. But early on, indulgences were granted when a sinner performed some hazardous duty for the Church - like going on a crusade. (A crusade to the Holy Land got you forgiveness for all sins ever committed.) Later, it became possible to buy indulgences on your deathbed. (Thus, you insured that you would enter heaven immediately, bypassing purgatory.)

With the Church engaged in a major fund-raising effort, the sale on indulgences took on new significance.

Pope Sixtus IV's fund-raising campaign touted indulgences which would free your deceased loved ones suffering in purgatory. Church envoys resorted to imitating the anguished wailing of parents who, in the throes of holy purification fires, pleaded with their children to buy an indulgence and ease their torment.

One creative envoy, a Dominican monk by the name of Johann Tetzel, made up a little ditty: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

**"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."**

At the height of the indulgence sale, Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar from Germany, traveled to Rome and was shocked by what he saw. How could the Church sell God's gifts to the highest bidder? And how could the bishops and cardinals behave with such moral laxity and worldliness?

Luther returned home and was plunged into a crisis of faith. He resolved his dilemma by coming up with the theory of grace, which would later become part of the Protestant theology. This theory holds that salvation comes by God's grace -- or God's indulgence, so to speak. A gift from God could clearly not be sold by the Church.

Full of youthful idealistic zeal (he was only 34 at the time), Luther posted his protest - the now famous "Ninety-Five Theses" - on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, on October 31, 1517.

The long and short of it was that his protest reached Rome and he was asked, in no uncertain terms, to recant. He refused, proclaiming his famous defense, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." He was excommunicated four years later.

But it was too late to silence him, thanks to a remarkable technological advance which would change history forever - the Gutenberg press.

A mere fifty years before Luther's protest, Johann Gutenberg had perfected a system of making metal letters in moulds, setting them in rows, and using the templates thus formed to print multiple copies of a document in minutes, which previously would have had to be copied tediously by hand over many hours.

**The Gutenberg  
press publicized  
Luther's  
indictment of the  
Church.**

When this incredible printing machine was applied to Luther's "Ninety Five Theses" - which, in effect, represented an indictment of the Church - all hell broke loose. What might have been a local dispute, with the protestant muzzled by his excommunication, became a public controversy that spread far and wide.

Martin Luther's new religion, called Protestantism, got a lot of backing across northern Europe from the nobles who were more than happy to throw the Church out of their land and seize the Church's wealth.

The Church had its allies as well, and Europe was thrown into the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). This war between Protestants and Catholics meant a lot of bloodshed and loss of life and destruction. And it had a big impact on the Jews.

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## LUTHER AND THE JEWS

Luther had seen how shamefully the Church had treated the Jews, and he had a plan to change that. He was sure that the reason that Jews did not convert to Christianity was that they couldn't stomach the corruption of the Church. Now the Jews would see that the Protestants were different and that they would be nice to the Jews. And then, the Jews would all become Christians.

He wrote in his work entitled, *That Jesus Christ Was A Jew*:

"For they [Church clergy] have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs and not human beings. They have done nothing for them but curse them and seize their wealth ... I hope that if the Jews are treated friendly

and instructed kindly enough through the Bible, many of them will become real Christians and come back to the ancestral faith of the prophets and patriarchs..."

Naturally, the Jews didn't go for Protestantism either. Their allegiance to Judaism and the Torah had nothing to do with the Christians being nasty to them. To Jews, Christianity was a false religion from the start, and the behavior of the Christians over the years only proved it.

Now Martin Luther would further add to that proof. As soon as the Jews rejected his overtures and didn't start converting en masse, Luther turned into one of the most virulent anti-Semites in history.

A few years later, he wrote in his *Concerning The Jews And Their Lies*:

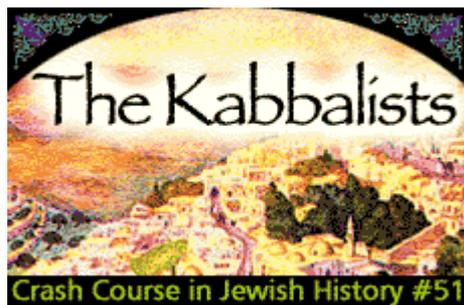
"What shall we do with this damned rejected race of Jews since they live among us and we know about their lying and blasphemy and cursing. We cannot tolerate them even if we do not wish to share their lives, curses and blasphemy. Perhaps we can spare a few of them from the fire and flames. Let me give you my honest advice..."

Luther's "honest advice" outlined a plan for dealing with the Jews. It included:

1. burn all synagogues
2. destroy Jewish holy books
3. forbid rabbis to teach
4. destroy Jewish homes
5. ban Jews from roads and markets
6. forbid Jews to make loans
7. seize Jewish property
8. force Jews to do hard labor
9. expel Jews from Christian towns

(For more on Luther's plan see *A History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson, p. 242. See also *Why the Jews?* by Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, p. 107.)

Four hundred years later, Hitler and the Nazis, using Luther's writings in their anti-Jewish propaganda, would put that plan into action.



**In the 16th century, the mountaintop town of Tzfat became the center of Jewish mysticism – the Kabbalah.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In the past few installments, we have been relating the events in the history of the Jews that happened during a period known as the Renaissance (1350 to 1650).

During this time we saw: a resurgence of classical knowledge and the waning power of the Church; the advent of the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews from various countries; the growth of Protestantism as a new offshoot of Christianity; the Golden Age of Polish Jewry and the Ukrainian massacres of Bogdan Chmielnicki. (See Parts 48, 49, and 50.)

Where was the Jewish world as the Renaissance was drawing to a close?

Geographically, about half the Jewish population was located in the Middle East, with a high concentration in Turkey and the lands of the Ottoman Empire. And about half in Europe, with a high concentration in Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania.)

That is not to say that *all* the Jews lived there. In fact, there were Jews literally the world over, including India and China. But for the purposes of a Crash Course in Jewish History, we are focusing on the large Jewish population centers.

## OTTOMAN EMPIRE

From the year 638 (six years after the death of Mohammed) when Caliph Omar invaded Jerusalem, the Land of Israel had been in Muslim hands - with the very short exception of the Crusades (1099 to 1187) - and would continue to be until the end of World War I in 1918.

During the years of the Renaissance -- from 1516 onward -- that Muslim power belonged to the Ottoman Empire based in Istanbul. It is important to note that although they were Muslims, the Ottomans were *not* Arabs - they were Turks.

The Turks were traditionally good to the Jews. We already saw how following the expulsion from Spain, Jews were welcomed into Ottoman lands by Sultan Bayezid II, who declared: "They tell me that Ferdinand of Spain is a wise man but he is a fool. For he takes his treasure and sends it all to me."

As the Ottoman Empire spread, the Turks came to Israel, and it was the greatest of the Ottoman sultans, known as "Suleiman the Magnificent," who re-built the walls of Jerusalem.

It is fascinating that Suleiman is Turkish for Solomon - and that it is his walls that define the Old City of Jerusalem to this day.

**In less than 100 years the population of Tzfat grew from a mere 300 families to 10,000 people.**

At this time many Jews started to return to the Land of Israel, and particularly to the city of Tzfat (sometimes spelled Safed). In less than 100 years the population of Tzfat grew from a mere 300 families to 10,000 people.

And during this time Tzfat gave birth to some amazing contributions to Jewish scholarship.

First, we must mention Rabbi Jacob Berav (1475 to 1546). He's very significant because he tried to do something which had not been done in the Jewish world for well over 1,000 years. He tried to re-institute *semichah*, "rabbinic ordination." *Semichah* is a "proper" rabbinic ordination which would come in a direct line from teacher to student traceable all the way back to Moses. It had been interrupted during Roman persecutions. Rabbis were still "ordained" but these

ordinations were neither "proper" nor "official" in the way Jewish law intended them to be, rather, they were merely symbolic.

Rabbi Berav thought it could be done properly again, and he ordained himself and one other person, but his attempt at re-instituting *semichah* was not successful. The rabbis in Jerusalem didn't recognize it, and, to this day, rabbinical ordination is symbolic only.

The one person that Rabbi Berav ordained was Rabbi Joseph Karo. Rabbi Karo (1488 to 1575) was among the Jews expelled from Spain, and he had made his way through Europe and Turkey and finally ended in Tzfat. There he wrote one of the most important books in Judaism - the *Shulchan Aruch* "The Prepared Table" - and it is a code of Jewish law which is followed to this day.

Before him, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, another Spanish rabbi, had attempted to organize Jewish law in a book called the *Arba Turim* ("Four Sections). Rabbi Joseph Karo took the *Arba Turim* and spent 32 years writing a commentary to it, which he called *Beit Yoseph*, "House of Joseph," and which he later condensed into the *Shulchan Aruch*.

Rabbi Karo was Sephardi, and Rabbi Moses Isserles (known as Ramah), a Polish rabbi from Krakow, wrote an Ashkenazi commentary to the *Shulchan Aruch* (see Part 49). To this day, the *Shulchan Aruch* by Joseph Karo, as amended by Moses Isserles, dictates Jewish law.

While Joseph Karo is today most famous for his book of law, he was a mystic. And it is no coincidence that he made his home in Tzfat, because in his day Tzfat became the center of Jewish mysticism.

## JEWISH MYSTICISM

What is Jewish mysticism?

Jewish mysticism is more popularly known as Kabbalah.

Kabbalah ("that which was received") is an interpretation of the Torah that focuses on the deepest, concealed meaning of the words and letters. According to Jewish tradition, this level of understanding of the Torah was revealed at Mt. Sinai, but because of its complexity, it was reserved for only a few initiated few. With time, that secret interpretation became more widely known and finally published and disseminated generally (though few could understand it).

The key work of Kabbalah is the *Zohar* - the "Book of Splendor." The contents of this book were first revealed by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in approximately 100 CE, while he lived in a cave, hiding out from the Romans. Many academicians claim that this book was written by Rabbi Moses de Leon, (1240-1305).

**The contents of the *Zohar*, "The Book of Splendor," were revealed by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the Roman era.**

Indeed Rabbi Moses de Leon, a Spanish rabbi, was the first to publish the *Zohar*, though he never claimed to be the author. Furthermore, the teachings which he published were not organized into a coherent whole and, as before, few could understand them.

Then Rabbi Moshe Cordovero of Tzfat (1522-1570), better known as the Ramak, entered the picture. The Ramak rationally systematized all of Kabbalistic thought up to his time, in particular

the teachings of the *Zohar*. In his work, *Pardes Rimonim*, "The Pomegranate Orchard," the Ramak demonstrated the underlying unity of Kabbalistic tradition by organizing the various, often seemingly contradictory, teachings into a coherent system.

The core of the Ramak's system consisted of a detailed description of how God created reality through the ten *sefirot* - channels of Divine energy. Understanding these ten forces is key in the study of Kabbalah today. (See [Kabbalah 101](#) series on aish.com)

But perhaps the most famous figure in the development of Kabbalah as we know it today was Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), popularly called the Ari.

The Ari was born in Jerusalem but subsequently relocated to Tzfat, arriving there on the day of the Ramak's funeral. He lived there only two years, dying at the age of 38, but in that short period of time he revolutionized the study of Kabbalah. In fact, his teachings - which were chiefly recorded by his disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital - virtually dictate the study of Kabbalah.

The Ari's system improved on that of the Ramak in that, rather than seeing the *sefirot* as one-dimensional points, he saw them as dynamically interacting *partzufim*, "personae," each with a symbolically human-like character.

In his understanding, human actions can impact on the *sefirot* -- which channel Divine energy into the world - and can either facilitate or impede the advancement of creation toward its intended state of perfection.

The Ari also advanced the study of reincarnation, which he explained in *Sha'ar He Gilgulim* "The Gate of Reincarnation."

During this period of time, many people came to study Kabbalah in Tzfat and legends are told of the Kabbalists, all dressed in white, walking out in the fields on the evening of Shabbat, singing the song welcoming the Shabbat Queen: *Lecha Dodi Likrat Kallah*, "Come My Beloved to Greet the Bride." (This famous song/poem was written by Rabbi Solomon HaLevi Alkabetz.)

## **SHABBETAI TZVI, THE FALSE MESSIAH**

Mysticism is always associated with Messianic expectation. But Messianic expectation - which is one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith as outlined by Maimonides -- can sometimes be misplaced and lead to big problems for the Jewish people.

This happened in the late 1600s and Jewish history of the previous 150 years - the expulsions, the Inquisition, the Chmielnicki massacres - set the scene. Jewish morale was low. It seemed that things could not get any worse. Surely, the time had arrived for the Messiah to come to the rescue.

At this time, a so-called mystic named Shabbetai Tzvi became prominent. Born in 1626 in Smyrna, Turkey, he was by all accounts a brilliant, charismatic if emotionally volatile man. By the age of 20, he was already given the title of *chacham*, "wise man," by the members of his community, though not too long after - when his behavior became erratic and people came to realize that though brilliant, he was also mentally unstable -- he was thrown out by them.

**Nathan of Gaza convinced Shabbetai Tzvi that he was the Messiah.** He started to wander the Middle East, and in 1651 he made his way to Israel, specifically to Gaza. There he met another so-called mystic by the name of Nathan of Gaza, who became his promoter. It was Nathan who convinced Shabbetai Tzvi that he was the Messiah, and he started sending letters to all Jewish communities that the Messiah had come to Israel.

One account of what happens next comes from a primary source, a Jewish woman living in Germany named "Glukel of Hamelin" whose memoirs give us insight into the life of European Jewry in the 17th century. She writes:

"About this time people began to talk of Shabbetai Tzvi but woe unto us that we have sinned and never lived to see what we heard and I believed. Throughout the world servants and children rent themselves with repentance, prayer and charity for two, yeah for three years my beloved people Israel sat in labor but there came forth naught but wind.

"Our joy when the letters arrive from Smyrna is not to be told. Most of them were addressed to Sephardim. As fast as they came they took the letters to the synagogue and read them aloud. Young and old the Germans too hastened to the Sephardic synagogues.

"Many sold their houses and lands and all their possessions for the day they hoped to be redeemed. My good father-in-law left his home in Hamelin, abandoned his house and lands and all of his goodly furniture. Full well we know the Most High has given us word and were we not so wicked but truly pious from the bottom of our hearts, I'm certain God would have mercy on us. If only we kept the commandment, 'thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,' but God forgive us for the way we keep it. No good can come from the jealousy and thoughtless hate that rules our lives..."

From this account, we see how eager Jews were for the Messiah to come after the many persecutions, and how easily they were swept up by Messianic fervor.

It must be noted however, that even though Shabbetai Tzvi had a huge following in the Jewish world (much more than Jesus ever had), the majority of the European rabbis were not fooled and warned against him.

Meanwhile Shabbetai Tzvi, believing his own story, went to pay a call on the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to demand recognition as the Messiah. He also wanted the Sultan to hand over the Land of Israel to him.

The Sultan, not impressed, promptly threw him in jail and then threatened to torture him to death if he did not convert to Islam.

So Shabbetai Tzvi converted. For his cooperation, he was even given a royal title, Aziz Mechmed Efendi, and a position, "Keeper of the Sultan's Gate." He continued to claim that he was the Messiah and the Sultan eventually exiled him.

Of course, as soon as he converted to Islam, the Jewish world stopped believing that he was the Messiah. A few Jews though wouldn't admit they were fooled - they converted to Islam along with him. This group - the Doenmeh - survived as a special Muslim sect within Turkey until World War I when the Ottoman Empire fell.

## BACKLASH

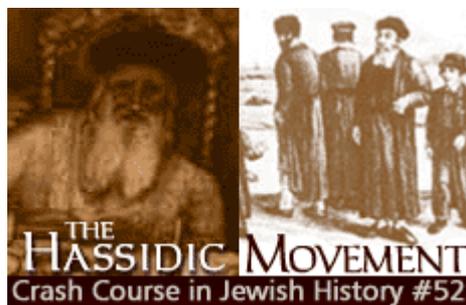
As a result of what happened with Shabbetai Tzvi, there was a backlash. The opponents of Shabbetai Tzvi, to whom no one had listened when Messianic fervor swept world Jewry -- particularly Rabbi Tzvi Ashkenazi of Amsterdam, who was known as the Chacham Tzvi and his son, Rabbi Yaakov Emden - came out blaming Jewish mysticism for the fiasco. This time people listened to them.

As a result of this backlash, some brilliant Kabbalists were unfairly condemned, hounded out of town and their books burned.

One of those was the Italian rabbi, Moshe Chaim Luzatto, known as the Ramchal (1707-1747). A great Kabbalist and a brilliant profound thinker, he wrote a book which is still intensely studied today, *Mesilat Yesharim*, "The Path of the Just." But because he was a Kabbalist, he was hounded out of Italy, and he came to Israel where he died at age 40.

His contribution to Jewish studies was not appreciated until after his death. Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, the Vilna Gaon ("Genius of Vilna"), later said about the works of the Ramchal that his understanding of Judaism was perfect, and that if the Ramchal were alive in Vilna Gaon's time, he would have walked from Vilna to Italy to sit at the Ramchal's feet and learn.

However, the Vilna Gaon, while praising the Ramchal, condemned another brilliant rabbi whose teachings were based on Kabbalah - the famous founder of the Hassidic movement, the Ba'al Shem Tov. That story follows.



**Initially a movement of the poor and uneducated, Hassidism introduced Kabbalah and spirituality into everyday life.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The Hassidic movement -- the movement of the "pious ones" or *Chassidut*, in Hebrew -- was founded in the 18th century in Eastern Europe by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, who became known as the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, which means "Master of the Good Name."

He was born in 1698 in Okup, in Podolia province (of what is now Ukraine) near the Dniester River. The Ba'al Shem Tov (who was also known as the *Besht*) was a poor orphan child who worked in the Carpathian Mountains as a laborer. During this time he studied with a secret society of Jewish mystics, the *Nestanim*, and he eventually became a revered rabbi.

He traveled from community to community, developing a reputation wherever he went as a spiritual holy man and mystical healer, attracting a huge following.

**The Ba'al Shem  
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Europe.**

His teachings revolutionized the demoralized, persecuted Jews of Eastern Europe.

After the pogroms and massacres, (see Part 49), Eastern European Jewry had slipped into dire poverty. One of the victims of this situation was Jewish scholarship, with only an elite few studying in yeshivas while the rest eked out a meager living. As a result of the decrease in scholarship, Jewish religious life suffered - with the average Jew not connecting either intellectually or spiritually with God. And this is what the Ba'al Shem Tov sought to change.

His teachings brought about a whole movement which emphasized the idea of bringing God into all aspects of one's life, particularly through intense prayer and joyous singing.

Hassidic thought stressed the importance of *devekut* or "clinging to God." This involves feeling the presence of God in all aspects of one's existence.

Trying to infuse one's life with spirituality in all aspects caught on very rapidly among the simple Jews in particular. Very rapidly, especially in Eastern Europe, thousands upon thousands of Jews were drawn to the Hassidic movement.

## **HASSIDIC DYNASTIES**

When the Ba'al Shem Tov died in 1760, his disciples went off to develop particular streams within the Hassidic movement and to found their own dynasties. There were many significant personalities in this group. (For those interested in reading about them, see *Chassidic Masters: History, Biography and Thought* by Aryeh Kaplan.) We will mention just a few:

- Rabbi Dov Ber (1704-1772). Known as the Maggid of Mezritch, he succeeded the Ba'al Shem Tov as head of the Hassidic movement and further developed many of the movement's philosophies. Incidentally, the great psychologist Carl G. Jung, nearing his death, said that all of his advances in psychology were preempted by Rabbi Dov Ber, which gives you an idea of the Maggid's intellectual prowess. (See *C.G. Jung Speaking*, p. 271-272.)
- Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, (1745-1812). He was known as the Alter Rebbe and the Ba'al HaTanya. He wrote the famous work, the *Tanya*, and founded the Lubavitch sect of Hassidism. The Lubavitch Hassidim are known as Chabad - which is an acronym for *chochmah*, ("wisdom"), *binah* ("understanding") and *da'at* ("knowledge.") According to Kabbalah, these are the three intellectual of the ten *sefirot* - channels of Divine energy - and their name for this Hassidic sect hints how much its teachings are steeped in Kabbalah.
- Rabbi Nachman of Breslav (1772-1811) was the great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov. He wrote *Likutei Moharan*, concentrating on the fallen and encouraging them to return to God through heartfelt prayer. But he is perhaps best known for his allegorical stories of beggars and princes through which he tried to teach deep truths to simple people. He founded the Breslaver sect of Hassidism.

Many Hassidic sects have names like Kotzk, Sanz, Belz, Satmar, Skvar. These were all names of communities in places like Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, etc. When these Hassidic communities moved, they took the names with them. So today in Israel you have Kiryat Sanz, Kiryat Belz. In New York, there are the New Square Hassidim - they were the Skvar Hassidim whose original name became anglicized to Square.

The movement had a huge impact in spiritually revitalizing the Jewish world. It kept a lot of Jews in Judaism and put a lot of joy back into Judaism.

Writes Aryeh Kaplan (in his essay "A World Beyond" in *Chassidic Masters: History, Biography and Thought* p. 4):

"Hassidism uplifted the masses, but it would be wrong to suppose that its teachings were designed solely as a kind of spiritual medicine, necessary when one is ill, but of no value for the healthy. An important teaching of Hassidism is that its insights are important to the spiritual well-being of every Jew. Although its masters aimed much of their energies at helping poor, illiterate Jews, it would be incorrect to say that this was the main characteristic of Hassidism, since the movement also brought new vision and depth to the entire body of Jewish thought."

## THE OPPOSITION

As it spread, the Hassidic movement also attracted tremendous opposition from those more intellectually-minded.

The major personality who was opposed to the Hassidic movement was Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon ("Genius of Vilna") and also the Gra (acronym for the "Gaon Rabbi Elijah") who lived in this time period (1720-1797).

**The Vilna Gaon rarely slept; when he got tired, he stuck his feet in cold water to wake himself up.** The Vilna Gaon was a brilliant scholar who made an enormous impact on Jewish learning. A person of wide-ranging interests and author of some 70 books on various subjects, the Vilna Gaon seemed to excel in every aspect of scholarship. He knew Jewish law, Kabbalah, mathematics, astronomy, physics, anatomy. He barely slept; he just catnapped four times a day for one hour, and the rest of the time he studied. Whenever he got tired, he stuck his feet in a bucket of cold water to wake himself up. He never wanted to waste a minute. Although he never made it to Israel, he sent many of his students there to establish yeshivas.

The Vilna Gaon felt the Hassidic movement was dangerous, and he felt so strongly about this that he wouldn't even sit down and meet with Hassidic representatives. Twice, delegations were sent to try and talk to him, but he simply refused to hear them.

What worried the Vilna Gaon was not so much the Kabbalistic aspects of Hassidism (after all, he himself had studied Kabbalah) but the potential for producing another false messiah (like Shabbetai Tzvi whose story we covered in Part 51). He thought that the movement would eventually declare the Ba'al Shem Tov the Messiah (which never did happen).

He was also concerned about the concept of the *rebbe* (as the leader of each Hassidic sect was called) as it made each community extremely dependent on one person's interpretation of Judaism. If that person were to "go off the road," veering off the path of proper Jewish thought and practice, he would take the whole community with him.

The second great concern of the Vilna Gaon was de-intellectualization of Torah. The Hassidic movement was largely a movement of simple, uneducated Jews, and he worried that Jewish scholarship was going to

be replaced by singing and dancing. A religion that was a synthesis of heart and mind would become all heart and no mind.

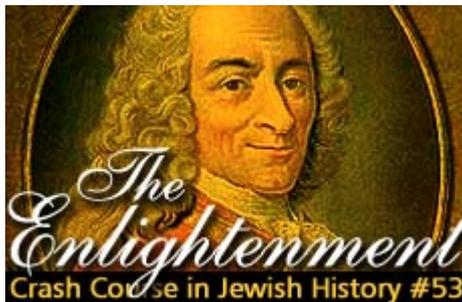
The Vilna Gaon was so strongly opposed to the Hassidic movement that he and others like him came to be called *misnagdim*, which means "those who are against." In 1772, the *misnagdim* excommunicated the *hassidim*, but the ban did not stick.

(For more on this subject, see *Triumph of Survival* by Berel Wein, pp. 86-119.)

In the end, the Hassidic movement did not create a separate religion and while it has developed its own customs, it did not cause a tremendous split. Today we can see *hassidic* sects who have become quite scholarship-minded, opening their own yeshivas and studying the Talmud intensely.

In hindsight we see that the Hassidic movement contributed significantly to the revitalization of Eastern European Jewry. It brought a lot of people back to Judaism who could well have been lost because they didn't have the time to study. And the pressure brought by the *misnagdim* against the *hassidim* probably acted as a brake in keeping them from going too far.

As a result of the Hassidic contribution, Judaism became stronger and more ready to face the assault it would soon face from a new secular movement in the Western called "The Enlightenment."



**The Age of Reason gave Jews civil rights, but its emphasis on a Godless society was bound to backfire.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The middle of the 17th century marked the end of the Renaissance. The new ideology that emerged in the post-Renaissance period -- as a result of what came to be known as the Enlightenment -- is an ideology that still permeates the Western world to a large extent. We have to understand this ideology and the Jewish people's relationship to it in order to make sense out of what happens next in Jewish history.

The Enlightenment (1650-1850) was a period of time characterized by breakthroughs in thinking which steered the world away from religion and more and more toward secularism, humanism, individualism, rationalism, and nationalism.

Of all of these, it was rationalism that more than any other concept defined the Enlightenment, which was also called the "Age of Reason."

In earlier installments, we spoke about how the Middle (Dark) Ages were dominated by the Church and were God-focused. Then came the Renaissance, a time that was man-focused with emphasis on the arts and classical knowledge. The Enlightenment expanded the man-focus even further. At this time the human

mind, rational thought, and empirical sciences took center stage. It was an age with total focus on the individual.

Because of it, we would eventually see many positive ideas and institutions emerging: liberal democracy, the scientific revolution, industrialization. But this focus on man also led to ideological attacks against some of the fundamental institutions of the Western world, including religion. Religion was viewed by the thinkers of the Enlightenment as an intellectual failing which was displaced by the ability of science to explain the unexplainable. Thus, a secular culture began to emerge as a very strong alternative to religion. The idea of a world without God took root in the Western world with big implications for Europe and the Jewish people.

**The idea of a world without God took root in the Western world with big implications for the Jews.**

As odd as it may sound, the less religious the Western world became, the better it treated the Jews. Christian fanatics killed Jews for various reasons as we have seen; the secularists, on the other hand, would do no such thing because the fact that a person was of a different religion did not matter to them. (What did matter more in this period was national, rather than religious identity.)

In tandem with secularism, the Enlightenment popularized the concept of individualism - each individual was valued and important, and along with this came an increased emphasis on civil rights.

On the surface, the emphasis on civil rights was good for the Jews. For the first time, the Western world started to look at the Jew as a human being. Edicts of toleration were issued, granting Jews certain basic (even if not equal) rights.

However, the problems with these ideas would surface and Jews would again be the victims.

## **THE BIG DIFFERENCE**

The world without a God-given standard gets itself in trouble sooner or later.

Judaism believes that for an ideal world there must be a focus on both God and man. Because without a focus on God, all moral values become relative. Why is this bad? Well, for a while it might be nice to have respect for civil rights, but when it becomes convenient or necessary (for various social or political reasons) to change that focus, then respect for human life becomes just another idea that goes out of style. God-given values are immutable and can never go out of style. That's a big difference.

This big difference explains how a key figure of the French Enlightenment, Jean Jacques Rousseau - the author of the *Social Contract* who espoused that human beings are equal - could have been so inhuman to his own children. Rousseau impregnated his young laundress five times and each time forced her to drop the newborn on the doorstep of an orphanage, the Hopital des Enfants-trouvés. This was an orphanage he himself had written about, noting that two-thirds of the babies there die within a year, and most of those that survive don't make it past age 7. His lofty ideas did not prevent him from practicing a modern version of infanticide. (See *The Intellectuals* by Paul Johnson, pp. 21-22.)

Likewise, all the talk of equality of man did not stop Francoise Voltaire from spewing out in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* vicious anti-Semitic diatribes and singling out the Jews as "the most abominable people in the world." Although he did state that Jews ought not to be killed, he cannot contain his hatred:

"In short we find them only ignorant and barbarous people with long united and most sordid avarice with the most detestable superstition and the most invincible hatred of every people by whom they are tolerated..."

In contrast to France, the situation was very different in England (where the Puritan Revolution had a big influence) and in the New World, where again the Puritans figured prominently. The American Revolution came about as a result of the synthesis of very religious Bible-based ideas brought over by the pilgrims and the humanist ideas (such as "the inalienable rights of man") advanced by John Locke. We see this clearly in the opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed *by their Creator* with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The French Revolution did not have this synthesis. It was purely a secular movement. And there the problems with the philosophy of the Enlightenment became very apparent.

The French reformers, after executing the king and queen, Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette, by guillotine, unleashed the Reign of Terror, during which time 25,000 "counter-revolutionaries" were executed in a similarly bloody manner.

The Reign of Terror for all practical purposes brought to end the Age of Reason. The bloody brutality of the masses shocked the world and severely tested the Enlightenment's belief that man could govern himself. A period of general unrest followed in France, marked by corruption and runaway inflation. All of it crashed when Napoleon Bonaparte came to power in a coup d'etat of 1804.

## **NAPOLEON AND THE JEWS**

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), a Corsican lieutenant, had himself crowned Emperor of France. During the ten years he held onto power, he embarked on a series of conquests where were unprecedented in terms of his rapid advance through Europe. A military genius, he took France on the offensive against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, against the Italians, against the Russians. And he almost beat all of them, becoming the master of the Continent and rearranging the whole map of Europe.

(What brought him down was the Russian winter, and once other European countries saw that he was vulnerable, they joined together and defeated him first at Leipzig in 1813 and finally at Waterloo in 1815. Exiled as a prisoner of war to the island of Saint Helena, he died there of cancer in 1821.)

As Napoleon marched through Europe, he liberated all the Jews from their ghettos.

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The idea of liberating the Jews and granting them civil rights had preceded him, but he really pushed it forward.

Napoleon was fascinated with the Jews, although he did not understand them. He wanted them to be accepted by the rest of European society, and he thought that they were not because they were different -- if only they could become more like others, people would accept them. So, he set about to help the Jews rid themselves of the things that set them apart. He advocated, for example, that one-third of all Jews must

intermarry with non-Jews.

Historian Berel Wein in his *Triumph of Survival* states that Napoleon was not the Judeophile that many Jews initially thought he was. Wein writes:

"Napoleon's outward tolerance and fairness toward Jews was actually based upon his grand plan to have them disappear entirely by means of total assimilation, intermarriage, and conversion."

Twice, in 1806 and in 1807, Napoleon convened gatherings of prominent Jewish leaders to promote his platform for "saving" the Jews. These religious leaders were astonished. On the one hand, they wanted to cooperate with Napoleon and make life easier for the Jews of Europe. On the other hand, they could not possibly acquiesce to some of Napoleon's ridiculous ideas which would have meant the destruction of Judaism. They answered him as diplomatically as possible, while sticking to Jewish law.

(For more on this subject see *The Jew in the Modern World* by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, pp. 112-132, and *Triumph of Survival* by Berel Wein, pp. 69-77.)

**The last two countries to grant Jews citizenship were Switzerland (1874) and Spain (1918).** Although Napoleon lost his wars in the end and ended up in exile, the things he put in motion had a huge ripple effect. By the end of the 19th century the notion of keeping Jews as non-citizens was no longer tenable in the more liberal environment in Europe. With time, Jews were granted citizenship in every country in Europe. Interestingly, the last two countries to grant Jews citizenship were Switzerland (1874) and Spain (1918).

This meant that by the late 19th century, Jews - who had been economically and physically marginalized, who had been locked out of any trades and professions - now were allowed (if not exactly welcomed) into all phases of European society.

Does that mean that the Enlightenment put an end to anti-Semitism?

Hardly.

It merely intellectualized it.

## THE NEW ANTI-SEMITISM

Once the gates of the ghettos were thrown open, the Jews rose to the top quickly, gaining prominence and wealth. This doesn't mean that, despite their achievement, they were accepted into general society. The times had changed, but not that much.

It is true that in Western Europe in the 19th century, there were no pogroms against the Jews. The post-Enlightenment society did not do things like that. Not in Western Europe anyway. (We will talk about Eastern Europe and particularly Russia in a future installment.)

But just because there were no pogroms doesn't mean that the non-Jews suddenly began to love the Jews.

**anti-Semitism of  
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anti-Semitism."**

The new anti-Semitism of this time can be called "intellectual anti-Semitism."

What that means is that people like Baron Lionel Rothschild - one of the most prominent and richest Jews in England - could not take a seat in the British Parliament after his election in 1847 because he refused to take an oath on the Christian Bible. It took eleven years and the passing of the "Jewish Disabilities Act" for him to have that right. (He became the first Jewish member of the British Parliament in 1858.)

Benjamin Disraeli, who was twice the Prime Minister of England during the reign of Queen Victoria, was able to achieve that position because his family converted to the Church of England.

So, yes, Jews were accepted into society as long as they were not too Jewish. If a Jew was willing to twist himself into taking an oath on the Christian Bible, or better yet, eschewing his religion, he was tolerated. If he insisted on being true to the Torah and the Hebrew Bible, he was told to stay out.

(In the next installment, we will examine one attempt of the Jews of Germany to get around this problem when we look at the beginnings of the Reform Movement within Judaism.)

It is interesting to note that in this time of unprecedented toleration the term "anti-Semitism" was first coined. It was the product of one of German's biggest thinkers of the 19th century -- Wilhelm Marr - who wanted to distinguish hatred of the Jews as members of a religion (anti-Judaism) from hatred of the Jews as members of a race/nation (anti-Semitism). In 1879, he wrote a book called *The Victory of Judaism over Germandom*, which went into twelve printings in six years - it was a runaway best-seller.

Another important thinker was Karl Eugen Duehring who in 1881 wrote *The Question of the Jew is a Question of Race*, summed up what anti-Semitism meant:

"The Jewish question would still exist even if every Jew were to turn his back on his religion and join one of our major churches. Yes, I maintain that in that case the struggle between us and the Jews would make itself felt even more urgent. It is precisely the baptized Jew who infiltrates furthestmost, unhindered in all sectors of society and political life. I return, therefore, to the hypothesis that the Jews are to be defined solely on the basis of race and not on the basis of religion."

Jews who were dropping their religion and rising to power, wealth and prominence did not pay enough attention to these ideas. If they did, they would have realized that their joy-ride was going to be a short one. Because even if Jews escaped anti-Judaism by becoming Christian, or secular, or even if they refashioned themselves to blend in, "anti-Semitism" -- which didn't care what they believed or how they behaved as long as they were Jews -- would get them in the end.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The German Jews who founded the Reform Movement emphasized their loyalty to the "fatherland" in order to be accepted in mainstream German society.**

As we saw in the last installment, the Enlightenment gave Jews new rights -- human rights and citizenship rights -- which they never had before. The new broad-mindedness went so far that Jews were even accepted into society as long as they were not "too Jewish" -- as long as they didn't dress too differently, behave too differently, eat a different diet, or insist on wearing their "old-fashioned" religion on their sleeve.

The reaction to this from some Jews was a staunch refusal to cooperate and get with the plan -- in any way, shape or form -- which is why you see Chassidim to this day wearing the garb common to 18th century Eastern Europe.

But there was also the opposite reaction from others. These Jews went along with the spirit of liberation and modernity and dropped the things that had made them different from other people -- such as keeping kosher, keeping Shabbat, etc.

**As soon as Jews drop their religion, they begin to assimilate.**

Of course, as soon as Jews drop their religion, they begin to assimilate. And this is what happened in huge numbers. Just how many we don't know. What we do know is that an estimated quarter of a million Jews converted to Christianity during this time and that countless others assimilated into the European culture.

Interestingly, the assimilation rate was higher where there were fewer Jews. In Eastern Europe, where the Jewish population was almost 5 million, 90,000 (or not quite 2%) converted to Christianity in order to have an easier life and mingle with mainstream society. But in Western Europe where there were fewer Jews, the proportions were much higher. The majority of the Jews of France assimilated, as did the majority of the Jews of Italy and Germany.

Why? Because in Western Europe, the non-Jews were much nicer to Jews and the attraction to join the mainstream was much greater.

Some Jewish converts to Christianity were very famous. In Part 53, we already mentioned Benjamin Disraeli, the British Prime Minister who became the great architect of Victorian imperialism. But we must also mention Karl Marx, the father of Communism.

Marx was converted by his father at age six; the father himself had converted a few years earlier in order to be able to practice law. Marx, who eventually became an atheist, is the author of *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*, ironically called the "Bible of the Worker." He is also famous for calling religion "the opiate of the masses."

A terrible example of a self-hating Jew, Marx blamed all the world problems on the Jews in his rage-filled *A World Without Jews*. Virulent hatred of Judaism and other Jews was not uncommon to such converts. It infected, among others, Heinrich Heine, one of the greatest figures in 19th century German literature.

Heine converted, as did so many, for pragmatic reasons, explaining his conversion: "From the nature of my thinking you can determine that baptism is a matter of indifference to me and I do not regard it as important even symbolically. My becoming a Christian is the ticket of admission to European culture." He was as cynical about Judaism, declaring it one of the world's three greatest evils (along with poverty and pain.)

## **GERMAN REFORM**

Perhaps the most unusual reaction to the changes of this time period came from a group of German Jews who formed what came to be known as the "Reform Movement."

The German Jews who began the Reform Movement in the early 1800s wanted to stay Jewish, but at the same time wanted to take advantage of the newly-won rights and freedoms, which were available only if one became a full-fledged member of European society. Traditional Jewish lifestyle and national identity were barriers to this aculturation. So these German Jews set about dropping some key aspects of traditional Judaism. The most dramatic of these was the belief that the Torah was given to Jews by God at Mount Sinai.

For 3,000 years Jews never questioned that the Torah came from God. The various sects that developed -- such as the Sadducees and the Karaites -- questioned the oral tradition or rabbinic law, but never the Divine origin of the Torah. This was an earth-shattering precedent.

The first break in the dam came from Moses Mendelssohn (1724-1804), a brilliant thinker who was known as the "hunchback philosopher." He advocated the "rational" approach to religion, as he wrote in his *Judaism as Revealed Legislation*:

"Religious doctrines and propositions ... are not forced upon the faith of a nation under the threat of eternal or temporal punishment but in accordance with the nature and evidence of eternal truths recommended to rational acknowledgment. The Supreme Being has revealed them to all rational creatures."

In effect, Mendelssohn was following the pattern of the thinkers of the Enlightenment, the "Age of Reason." Religion should be rational. If the law of God seems irrational, then man must follow reason.

By opening up Judaism to this kind of rational skepticism, Mendelssohn opened the door through which others rushed in.

This is not to suggest that before him Judaism was closed to skepticism. Indeed, being skeptical was always a big part of Judaism, but that skepticism was grounded in certain beliefs and assumptions, which in the Reform Movement came tumbling down.

The first Reform service was conducted by Israel Jacobson in his school chapel in Seesen, Germany in 1810, and it was adopted by the first Reform synagogue which opened in Hamburg in 1818.

The Reform service had a choir, robes, and an organ; it was conducted in German with German songs and German prayers in a deliberate attempt to emphasize nationalistic loyalty and identity.

Jewishly, however, this was quite a departure. Up until then, Jews prayed in Hebrew, reciting the prayers composed by the Men of the Great Assembly and by the Sanhedrin some two thousand years earlier. Jews never played musical instruments during Shabbat services, and certainly not an organ which was an instrument common to Christian churches, as was the choir and the robes.

**Not long after, the Reform Movement switched Shabbat from Jewish Saturday to Christian Sunday.**

Not long after, the Reform Movement switched Shabbat from Jewish Saturday to Christian Sunday, and came to call its synagogues "temples" to underscore the point that Reform Jews no longer looked to the rebuilding of "The Temple" in Jerusalem.

In fact, Reform leader Samuel Holdheim (1806-1860), who became the head of the Reform congregation in Berlin, argued against the mention of Jerusalem, Zion, or the land of Israel during services. He opposed circumcision, wearing of skull caps or prayer shawls, or the blowing of the shofar -- in short just about anything traditionally Jewish.

Another Reform leader Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), who led reform groups in Breslau, Frankfurt and Berlin, called circumcision "a barbaric act of blood-letting rite" and advocated against "the automatic assumption of solidarity with Jews everywhere."

These were big breaks with tradition. Ever since Abraham, circumcision was the way Jews marked their covenant with God. And Jews helping each other in times of trouble -- one for all and all for one -- was seen as an integral part of Jewish nature as defined by God (see Part 14).

Reformers of Germany declared that they were not members of the nation of Israel but "Germans of the Mosaic persuasion."

The philosophy of the German Reform Movement evolved further at conferences held in Brunswick in 1844 and in Frankfurt in 1845. Here are excerpts that show how much the Jews of Germany wanted to show their allegiance to their country of residence, which meant disavowing any allegiance the Land of Israel or the Hebrew language:

- "For Judaism the principle of human dignity is cosmopolitan but I would like to put proper emphasis on the love for a particular people among whom we live and its individual members. As men we love all mankind but as Germans we love the Germans as children of the fatherland. We are and ought to be patriots, not merely cosmopolitan."
- "The hope for national restoration [to Israel] contradicts our feelings for the fatherland [Germany]."
- "The wish to return to Palestine in order to create their political empire is superfluous."
- "By considering Hebrew as being of central importance to Judaism, moreover, one would define it as a national religion. Because a separate language is a characteristic element of a separate nation. But no member of this conference, the speaker concluded, would wish to link Judaism to a particular nation."

(For more on this subject, see *History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson, pp. 333-335, and *Triumph of Survival* by Berel Wein pp. 52-53, and *The Jew in the Modern World* ed. by Paul Medes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz pp. 161-177.)

Along the way, the members of Reform Movement coined a new term to describe those who stuck to traditional Judaism -- they called them the "Orthodox."

In places where the Reform Movement succeeded in attracting the majority of Jews, it did its best to force its agenda on the minority. In Frankfurt, for example, the mikvah (the ritual pool) was closed, kosher slaughter was banned, the teaching of Torah was forbidden. The Orthodox Jews were basically run out of town.

Why?

The German Reformers were afraid that while they might be able to assimilate into the larger German culture, as long as there continued to exist a group of Jews who chose to act as Jews and openly identify as such -- that is, Jews who irked the Germans -- then the Germans would lump everyone together and continue to be hostile toward them as well.

But of course the Jews who would not go along with the Reform Movement weren't about to take all this sitting down.

The leader of the Orthodox counter-attack against the Reform Movement was a rabbi by the name of Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 to 1888). Born in Hamburg and educated at the University of Bonn, he was the chief rabbi of Moravia, a community of 50,000 Jews.

In 1851 he moved to Frankfurt (where there were only 100 Orthodox families left) to wage the philosophical war against the Reform bans there.

As part of his fight he succeeded in setting up his own Orthodox institution in Frankfurt which is called the Kahal Adas Yeshurin, and he created his own religious school system.

**There is no need to drop Torah in order to get along in the modern world.**

His aim was to show those Jews who wanted to be modern that it was possible -- all within the context of traditional Judaism. There is no need to drop Torah in order to get along in an evolving world as the Torah makes provisions for all that. This is what he wrote in 1854 in an article entitled, "Religion Allied to Progress" (see *Collected*

*Writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch*):

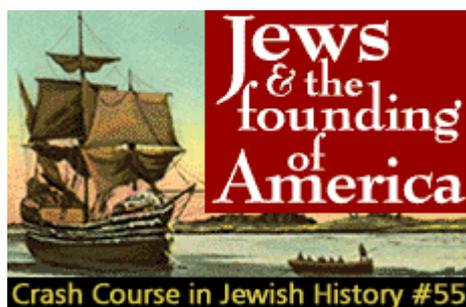
"Now what is it that we want? Are the only alternatives either to abandon religion or to renounce all progress? We declare before heaven and earth that if our religion demanded that we should renounce what is called civilization and progress we would obey unquestioningly, because our religion is for us the word of God before which every other consideration has to give way. There is, however, no such dilemma. Judaism never remained aloof from true civilization and progress. In almost every area its adherents were fully abreast of contemporary learning and very often excelled their contemporaries. An excellent thing is the study of Torah combined with the ways of the world."

What Rabbi Hirsch emphasized was that the normal Jewish way to be is to be fully in the world but also to be fully immersed in Torah. It is not a question of "either Torah or the World" - it's a question of priorities. He made it very clear that the first priority is Torah. In contrast to Mendelssohn, he said that even if you didn't understand some part of the Torah, you had to follow it anyway because it is the word of God.

(For more on this subject see *Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Architect of Torah Judaism for the Modern World* by Elijah Meir Klugman.)

Despite the efforts of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and others, the Reform Movement spread, not just inside Germany but to other countries as well, though each group of Reformers had its own take on it. For example, the Reform Jews of England in the West London Synagogue adopted a quasi-Karaite position. They stuck to the Torah as the word of God, but rejected the teachings of the Talmud.

In America, the Reform Movement also took on its special character after it was transplanted there from Germany by several hundred thousand German immigrants in the mid-19th century. We will take a look at it when we take up the Jewish life in America.



**The amazing story of Jewish influence on the founding of American democracy is a well-kept secret.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The creation of the United States of America represented a unique event in world history -- it was a democracy from its inception, it was rooted in the Bible, and one of its earliest tenets was religious tolerance.

This is because many of the earliest pilgrims who settled the "New England" of America in early 17th century were Puritan refugees escaping religious persecutions in Europe.

These Puritans viewed their emigration from England as a virtual re-enactment of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. To them, England was Egypt, the king was Pharaoh, the Atlantic Ocean was the Red Sea, America was the Land of Israel, and the Indians were the ancient Canaanites. They were the new Israelites, entering into a new covenant with God in a new Promised Land.

Thanksgiving -- first celebrated in 1621, a year after the Mayflower landed -- was initially conceived as a day parallel to the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur; it was to be a day of fasting, introspection and prayer.

Writes Gabriel Sivan in *The Bible and Civilization* (p. 236):

"No Christian community in history identified more with the People of the Book than did the early settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who believed their own lives to be a literal reenactment of the Biblical drama of the Hebrew nation ... these emigre Puritans dramatized their own situation as the righteous remnant of the Church corrupted by the 'Babylonian woe,' and saw themselves as instruments of Divine Providence, a people chosen to build their new commonwealth on the Covenant entered into at Mount Sinai."

Previously, during the Puritan Revolution in England, (1642-1648) the Puritan extremists sought to replace English common law with Biblical laws of the Old Testament, but were prevented from doing so. In America, however, there was far more freedom to experiment with the use of Biblical law in the legal codes of the colonies and this was exactly what these early colonists set out to do.

The earliest legislation of the colonies of New England was all determined by Scripture. At the first assembly of New Haven in 1639, John Davenport clearly stated the primacy of the Bible as the legal and moral foundation of the colony:

"Scriptures do hold forth a perfect rule for the direction and government of all men in all duties which they are to perform to God and men as well as in the government of families and commonwealth as in matters of the Church ... the Word of God shall be the only rule to be attended unto in organizing the affairs of government in this plantation."

Subsequently, the New Haven legislators adopted a legal code -- the Code of 1655 -- which contained some 79 statutes, half of which contained Biblical references, virtually all from the Hebrew Bible. The Plymouth Colony had a similar law code as did the Massachusetts assembly, which, in 1641 adopted the so-called "Capitall Lawes of New England" based almost entirely on Mosaic law.

Of course, without a Jewish Oral Tradition, which helped the Jews understand the Bible, the Puritans were left to their own devices and tended toward a literal interpretation. This led in some instances to a stricter, more fundamentalist observance than Judaism had ever seen.

## **JEWISH INFLUENCE ON EDUCATION**

The Hebrew Bible also played a central role in the founding of various educational institutions including Harvard, Yale, William and Mary, Rutgers, Princeton, Brown, Kings College (later to be known as Columbia), Johns Hopkins, Dartmouth etc.

Many of these colleges even adopted some Hebrew word or phrase as part of their official emblem or seal. Beneath the banner containing the Latin "Lux et Veritas," the Yale seal shows an open book with the Hebrew "Urim V'Timur," which was a part of the breastplate of the High Priest in the days of the Temple. The Columbia seal has the Hebrew name for God at the top center, with the Hebrew name for one of the angels on a banner toward the middle. Dartmouth uses the Hebrew words meaning "God Almighty" in a triangle in the upper center of its seal.

**American universities, including Harvard and Yale taught courses in Hebrew.**

So popular was the Hebrew Language in the late 16th and early 17th centuries that several students at Yale delivered their commencement orations in Hebrew. Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Brown, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Pennsylvania taught courses in Hebrew - all the more remarkable because no university in England at the time offered it. (In America, Bible study and Hebrew were course requirements in virtually all these colleges and students had the option of delivering commencement speeches in either Hebrew, Latin or Greek.)

Many of the population, including a significant number of the Founding Fathers of America, were products of these American Universities - for example, Thomas Jefferson attended William and Mary, James Madison Princeton, Alexander Hamilton King's College (i.e.

Columbia). Thus, we can be sure that a majority of these political leaders were not only well acquainted with the contents of both the New and Old Testaments, but also had some working knowledge of Hebrew.

Notes Abraham Katsch in *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (p. 70):

"At the time of the American Revolution, the interest in the knowledge of Hebrew was so widespread as to allow the circulation of the story that 'certain members of Congress proposed that the use of English be formally prohibited in the United States, and Hebrew substituted for it.'"

## **JEWISH SYMBOLISM IN AMERICA**

Their Biblical education colored the American founders' attitude toward not only religion and ethics, but most significantly, politics. We see them adopting the biblical motifs of the Puritans for political reasons. For example, the struggle of the ancient Hebrews against the wicked Pharaoh came to embody the struggle of the colonists against English tyranny. Numerous examples can be found which clearly illustrate to what a significant extent the political struggles of the colonies were identified with the ancient Hebrews.

- The first design for the official seal of the United States recommended by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas in 1776 depicts the Jews crossing the Red Sea. The motto around the seal read: "Resistance to Tyrants is Obedience to God."
- The inscription on the Liberty Bell at Independence Hall in Philadelphia is a direct quote from Leviticus (25:10): "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."
- Patriotic speeches and publications during the period of the struggle for independence were often infused with Biblical motifs and quotations. Even the basic framework of America clearly reflects the influence of the Bible and power of Jewish ideas in shaping the political development of America. Nowhere is this more evident than in the opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Whereas, these words echo the ideas of the Enlightenment (see Part 53), without a doubt, the concept that these rights come from God is of Biblical origin.

This and the other documents of early America make it clear that the concept of a God-given standard of morality is a central pillar of American democracy. Even the currency of the new democracy proclaimed: "In God We Trust."

Many more things can be said about the Jewish influence on the values of America, but this is, after all, a crash course. We next turn to the Jews themselves.

## **EARLY AMERICAN JEWS**

The history of Jews in America begins before the United States was an independent country.

The first Jews arrived in America with Columbus in 1492, and we also know that Jews newly-converted to Christianity were among the first Spaniards to arrive in Mexico with Conquistador Hernando Cortez in 1519.

**The Inquisition came to Mexico City to make sure the Jewish conversos were not really heretics.**

In fact, so many Jewish *conversos* came to Mexico that the Spanish made a rule precluding anyone who could not prove Catholic ancestry for four generations back from migrating there. Needless to say, the Inquisition soon followed to make sure these Jewish *conversos* were not really heretics, and burnings at the stake became a regular feature of life in Mexico City.

As for North America, the recorded Jewish history there begins in 1654 with the arrival in New Amsterdam (later to be known as New York) of 23 Jewish refugees from Recife, Brazil (where the Dutch had just lost their possessions to the Portuguese). New Amsterdam was also a Dutch possession, but the governor Peter Stuyvesant did not want them there. Writes Arthur Hertzberg in *The Jews in America* (p. 21):

"Two weeks after they landed, Stuyvesant heard the complaint from the local merchants and from the Church that 'the Jews who had arrived would nearly all like to remain here.' Stuyvesant decided to chase them out. Using the usual formulas of religious invective -- he called the Jews 'repugnant,' 'deceitful,' and 'enemies and blasphemers of Christ' - Stuyvesant recommended to his directors ... 'to require them in a friendly way to depart.'"

The only reasons the Jews were not turned out was that the Dutch West Indian Company, which was heavily depended on Jewish investments, blocked it.

## **JEWES AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

By 1776 and the War of Independence, there were an estimated 2,000 Jews (men, women and children) living in America, yet their contribution to the cause was significant. For example, in Charleston, South Carolina, almost every adult Jewish male fought on the side of freedom. In Georgia, the first patriot to be killed was a Jew (Francis Salvador). And additionally, the Jews provided significant financing for the patriots.

**Haym Salomon advanced the American government \$200,000; he was never paid back and died bankrupt.**

The most important of the financiers was Haym Salomon who lent a great deal of money to the Continental Congress. In the last days of the war, Salomon advanced the American government \$200,000. He was never paid back and died bankrupt.

President George Washington remembered the Jewish contribution when the first synagogue opened in Newport, Rhode Island in 1790. (It was called the Touro Synagogue and it was Sephardi.) He sent this letter, dated August 17, 1790:

"May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in the land continue to merit and enjoy the goodwill of the other inhabitants. While everyone shall sit safely under his own vine and fig-tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."

Note the reference to the "vine and fig-tree." That unique phrase is a reference to the words of Prophet Michah prophesying the Messianic utopia:

*But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow to it. And many nations shall come, and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the*

*God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; for Torah shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.' And he shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide concerning far away strong nations; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree; and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken it.*

This was an interesting choice of words on the part of Washington, but, as noted above, it is not surprising in light of the enormous influence that the Hebrew Bible had had on the pilgrims and on the founding fathers of the new nation.

## **AMERICAN AMBIVALENCE TOWARD THE JEWS**

It must be noted however that some of the other founding fathers were a bit more ambivalent about the Jews than was Washington.

John Adams, who said some highly complimentary things about the Jews, also noted that "it is very hard work to love most of them [the Jews]. And he looked forward to the day when "the asperities and peculiarities of their character" would be worn away and they would become "liberal Unitarian Christians."

Thomas Jefferson thought Jews needed more secular learning so that "they will become equal object of respect and favor," implying that without such learning they could not expect to be respected. Writes Arthur Hertzberg in *The Jews in America* (p. 87):

"Jefferson was thus expressing the view of the mainstream of the Enlightenment, that all men could attain equal place in society, but the 'entrance fee' was that they should adopt the ways and the outlook of the 'enlightened.' Jefferson did not consider that a Yiddish-speaking Jew who knew the Talmud was equal in usefulness to society with a classically trained thinker like himself."

This idea that there was freedom for you in America as long as you were not "too Jewish," kept most Jews away. Until 1820, the Jewish population of America was only about 6,000!

This changed in the 1830s when Reform German Jews, who had scrapped traditional Judaism and were not "too Jewish," began to arrive. The great migrations of poor, oppressed Jews from Eastern Europe would follow near the turn of the century. But before we take up that story, we must look to see what is happening to the Jews of Europe.



**An area of Russia where Jews were most oppressed, the Pale of Settlement gave rise to amazingly good things.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

[HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)

The Napoleonic Enlightenment, which emancipated the Jews of Western Europe, did not make it to Eastern Europe where most Jews lived in the 18th-19th centuries.

The largest concentration of Jews -- or about 5 million -- was then located there; this represented 40% of the Jewish population worldwide.

From 1791 until 1915, the Jews living in Eastern Europe were confined by the Czars of Russia -- starting with Catherine the Great -- to an area known as the "Pale of Settlement" (meaning "borders of settlement"). The Pale consisted of 25 provinces that included Ukraine, Lithuania, Belorussia, Crimea, and part of Poland (which had been partitioned between Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1772).

Jews were specifically expelled from Moscow and St. Petersburg and forced into the Pale. Later they were also expelled from rural areas within the Pale and forced to live only in shtetls.

Despite the oppression some amazing things happened in the Pale.

**Charity --  
tzedakah, which  
in Hebrew means  
"justice" --  
thrived, as Jews  
helped each  
other.**

For one thing, charity -- *tzedakah*, which in Hebrew means "justice" -- thrived, as Jews helped each other. The historian Martin Gilbert writes in his *Atlas of Jewish History* that no province in the Pale had less than 14% of Jews on relief, and Lithuanian and Ukrainian Jews supported as much as 22% of their poor population:

"Among the charitable societies organized by Jews were those to supply poor students with clothes, soldiers with kosher food, the poor with free medical treatment, poor brides with dowries, and orphans with technical education."

This was an incredibly sophisticated social welfare system. In times of great hardship, no Jew was abandoned.

This caring for each other did not escape the notice of non-Jews.

In fact, during this period of time the rabbis had to issue a decree against accepting any converts to Judaism from the local Slavic population. Why would Christian Slavs want to convert to Judaism? They realized that no Jew ever starved to death in the street, whereas if you were a Christian peasant you could easily starve to death in the street because no one was going to take care of you. The government wasn't going to do it and the Church wasn't going to do it. So the rabbis didn't want Judaism being flooded by thousands of insincere converts who were trying to save their lives by becoming Jews and benefiting from the Jewish social welfare system.

## TORAH LEARNING

Another amazing thing that happened in the Pale, despite the oppression, was the re-birth of Torah learning.

Torah studies (as we saw in Part 52) had fallen by the wayside in the 18th century and had become a preserve of the elite.

In 1803, Rabbi Chaim ben Isaac of Volozhin (1749-1821), a student of the Vilna Ga'on, set about to correct this situation. Most yeshivas during this period were small institutions of learning supported by individual

towns in which they were based. Rabbi Chaim proposed to found a large institution, open to all, and supported by many communities.

He sent letters to the chief rabbis of cities throughout Europe asking them to send to him their best students to study at his yeshiva in Volozhin, Lithuania, where he promised to provide them with financial support, top teachers, and a high-level standardized curriculum. The response to his letter was very positive and a large number of students were sent to the Volozhin Yeshiva, which eventually enrolled 450 students.

Unfortunately, the Volozhin Yeshiva didn't last too long as the Czarist government of Russia saw what was going on and tried to force it to adopt a more secular curriculum as part of making it less Jewish. While the Volozhin Yeshiva was willing to tolerate some secular studies, the Russian demand that all faculty members have diplomas from recognized Russian educational institutions in order to teach "Russian language and culture" was not acceptable. And so, the yeshiva was closed in 1892 by Russian inspectors and its students exiled.

Although it had been in operation less than 100 years, it had become the model for the modern yeshiva. By the time the Volozhin closed, other yeshivas based on its models were already in operation, many started by the students of the Volozhin.

## THE MUSSAR MOVEMENT

During the same period of time that saw the re-birth of Torah studies there arose in the Pale a new emphasis on what should be the primary focus of those studies. The impetus came from a very important movement within Judaism called the Mussar Movement ("Morality Movement").

Its founder was a most unusual man, Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant (1810-1883), better known as Rabbi Israel Salanter.

Many stories are told about his goodness. Among the most famous is the story of his disappearance one Yom Kippur from his synagogue. As the congregation fretted for his safety, delaying services until he arrived, one young mother took the opportunity to rush back home to check on her baby, which she had left alone. There she found the rabbi, rocking the cradle. Hearing the baby crying, he had stopped to comfort it, putting the needs of another human being ahead of his personal spiritual fulfillment.

**Rabbi Salanter restored the study of morality and ethics to their central place in Torah learning.** Rabbi Salanter, though the epitome of kindness, could also be confrontational when the question of ethics or morality was at stake. Such was his stance, when he learned that a poor widow's two sons were drafted into the Russian Army, because a rich man had bribed the officials so that his son would not be taken. He confronted the entire community in the synagogue regarding the matter in order to win justice for the widow.

Rabbi Salanter was driven to restore the study of morality and ethics to their central place in Torah learning. He felt that a lot of Talmudic study had become very legalistic, intellectual, and devoid of advice on how to develop a personal relationship to God or methods of how to be a better person in relationship to one's fellows.

The manual of the Mussar Movement became the 18th century work by the Kabbalist Moshe Chaim Luzatto -- *The Path of the Just*.

At the time that Rabbi Salanter initiated Mussar studies, his system was controversial simply because it was new. Orthodox Jews were worried at first that this might be another type of "reform."

But the Mussar Movement overcame their misgivings and its teachings are now central to the curricula of many yeshivas.

The most famous of the yeshivas specializing in Mussar studies is the Navaradok Yeshiva, founded by Rabbi Joseph of Navaradok, a disciple of Rabbi Salanter. This is also the yeshiva which gave rise to the Beis Ya'acov system of women's education.

Other yeshivas, many of which were founded by the graduates of the Volozhin Yeshiva and which incorporated the teachings of Rabbi Salanter and the Mussar Movement, were:

- the Mir (the great yeshiva which migrated to Shanghai during the Holocaust and eventually relocated in Jerusalem and Brooklyn)
- Slobodka (which moved to Hebron, Israel, and when destroyed by the Arabs, to Jerusalem and Bnei Brak)
- Telshe (now in Cleveland, Ohio)
- Slutzk (now in Lakewood, New Jersey).

## FORCED SECULARIZATION

While Orthodox Jews accepted and embraced the Mussar Movement after an initial hesitation, the non-Orthodox continued to oppose it.

Chief among the opponents was a group called the *Maskilim* ("the Enlightened Ones"), who opposed traditional Judaism in any way, shape or form.

**The *Maskilim* wanted their fellow Jews to drop Judaism and join the Russian culture.** This was the group that aided the Czarist government in the closing of the Volozhin Yeshiva. Why? Because the *Maskilim* wanted their fellow Jews to drop Judaism and join the Russian culture. They argued: "Let's study Russian culture ... let's speak in Russian and write in Russian ... let's be just like them, and they'll accept us, and we'll be able to integrate more effectively into society and end the horrible poverty so many live under."

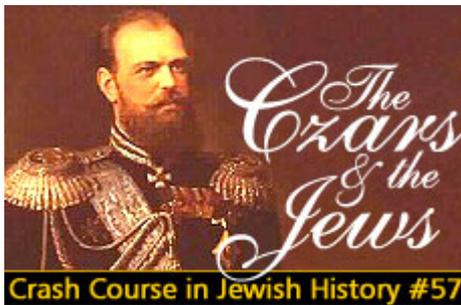
An important figure among the *Maskilim* was Dr. Max Lienthal (1813-1882), a German Jew who came to Russia as director of the "enlightened" Jewish school of Riga. He was eventually appointed by the Russian government (of Czar Nicholas I) as the Minister of Jewish Education and went about attempting to convince the Jews of the Pale of the Czar's "benign intent" in establishing a new educational system for them.

This was during the time when the Czar was attempting to "restructure" the Jewish society in Russia with laws forbidding the wearing of traditional clothing, decrees against Talmud study, and division of Jews into

"useful" (farmers, artisans, skilled workers) and "useless" (unskilled workers, rabbis, orphans, the sick and unemployed).

In this climate, in 1843, a conference was convened on the subject of Jewish education, which pitted Lilienthal against Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the Rebbe of Chabad Lubavitch also known as the Tzemach Tzedek. Lilienthal could not stand up to the arguments of these rabbis, who managed to win the right for Jews to retain their traditional school system in competition with Lilienthal's new school system. (See Berel Wein's *Triumph of Survival*, p. 157.)

Within a decade, Lilienthal's schools closed for lack of faculty and students, though Lilienthal's defenders claim that he left because he realized that the Czar's "benign intent" was to convert Jews to Christianity. He migrated to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he headed up a Reform congregation.



**In Czarist Russia,  
government-organized  
pogroms against the Jews  
kept the eyes of masses off  
the corrupt regime.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

It is arguable which of the Russian Czars was the worst to the Jews. We'll start with Czar Nicholas I (who ruled from 1825 to 1855) as one of the prime contenders and work our way down.

In 1827, Czar Nicholas I introduced what became known as the Cantonist Decrees. (The name came from the word "canton," meaning "military camp.") These decrees called for the forced conscription of Jewish boys into the Russian Army. These boys were between the ages of 12 and 18 and were forced to serve for 25 years! During their army service, every effort was made to convert them to Christianity.

Due to the horrendous conditions under which they were forced to serve, very few of the boys who were conscripted came out alive, and if they did, they no longer identified themselves as Jews. As far as the Jewish community was concerned, either way was a death sentence.

Some Jewish parents were so desperate they would actually cut off the right index finger of their sons with a butcher's knife -- without an index finger you couldn't fire a gun and you were exempt from service. Other people would try and bribe their kid's way out.

The Cantonist Decrees raise the level of pressure on the Jewish community to new extremes.

If that wasn't bad enough, there was the government-sponsored anti-Semitism.

## **PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION**

Around the turn of the century, the Russian secret police began to circulate a forgery which became the most famous anti-Semitic "document" in history. from <http://www.servantsofjesus.org> **The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.** These protocols

purported to be the minutes of a secret meeting of world Jewish leaders, which supposedly took place once every hundred years for the purpose of plotting how to manipulate and control the world in the next century.

As ridiculous as this might sound to us today, the *Protocols* were seized upon as "proof" that the world was dominated by Jews who were responsible for all of the world's problems.

**The Protocols claim to "prove" a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world.** Fans and proponents of the *Protocols* have included such anti-Semites as: Henry Ford, the founder of Ford Motor Company; Adolf Hitler, as might be expected; Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser; and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, among others.

Despite the fact that the *Protocols* are a proven forgery whose allegations are completely ridiculous, and that they are considered an expression of the worst kind of anti-Semitism, the *Protocols* continue to sell briskly today and are carried by such huge bookstore chains as Barnes and Noble and amazon.com in the name of freedom of speech.

## POGROMS

We spoke of pogroms -- mob violence against Jews -- in [Part 49](#) when we covered the murderous attacks of the Ukrainian Cossack Bogdan Chmielnicki in 17th century Poland.

In Czarist Russia, there were so many pogroms against the Jews that it is simply impossible to even begin to list them all. (In one four year period there was 284 pogroms, for example.)

These pogroms were seldom spontaneous, though incitement by Christian clergy around the Christian holidays could drive the masses into a frenzy. However, in Czarist Russia, most of the pogroms were government organized. Why would the Czarist government organize mobs to target Jews? Because Jews were the classic scapegoats for the economic problems of Russia (and many other countries in history).

**The problems of Russia had to do with a totally backward, feudal, and highly corrupt regime.** Of course, the problems of Russia had nothing to do with the Jews. The problems of Russia had to do with a totally backward, feudal, and highly corrupt regime. One of the ways of diverting attention from the corruption was to blame the Jews and to allow the masses to blow off steam by taking it out on the Jews.

The problems of Russia got worse after Czar Alexander II (who was one of the more competent Czars and who was relatively benign to the Jews) was assassinated in 1881 by an anarchist who threw a bomb at his carriage. And when the problems of Russia got worse, the problems of the Jews got worse as well.

The government of the new Czar, Alexander III (who ruled 1881-1894) organized one pogrom after another to keep the anger of the masses focused on the Jews.

In addition to the pogroms, Alexander III promulgated a series of laws against the Jews. These laws were called the May Laws and they included such prohibitions as:

1. "It is henceforth forbidden for Jews to settle outside the cities and townships."
2. "The registration of property and mortgages in the names of Jews is to be halted temporarily. Jews are also prohibited from administering such properties."

3. "It is forbidden for Jews to engage in commerce on Sundays and Christian holidays."

Writes Berel Wein in *Triumph of Survival* (p. 173) of the reign of Alexander III:

"Expulsions, deportations, arrests, and beatings became the daily lot of the Jews, not only of their lower class, but even of the middle class and the Jewish intelligentsia. The government of Alexander III waged a campaign of war against its Jewish inhabitants ... The Jews were driven and hounded, and emigration appeared to be the only escape from the terrible tyranny of the Romanovs."

It did not help matters any that during the reign of Alexander III a terrible famine struck Russia in which 400,000 peasants died. Those who survived were bitter and their resentments grew (which would erupt eventually in an aborted revolution in 1905 and the successful Russian Revolution which ushered in Communist rule in 1917.)

## **THE LAST ROMANOV**

When Alexander III died, he was succeeded by Nicholas II, the last of the Romanovs. The new Czar had to cope with the mess left behind by his father and he did so badly.

During his reign one of the most famous pogroms took place -- in Kishinev, on Easter (April 6-7), 1903.

The Kishinev pogrom happened when there was a lot of tension in Russia (two years before the first, unsuccessful revolution). Wanting to dispel the tension, the Czarist government once again organized a pogrom against the Jews.

Strange as it may sound, the Kishinev pogrom received a lot of international attention. This was because by this time pogroms were something that the "enlightened" Western World no longer found acceptable. (If only they knew what they themselves would do to the Jews 40 years later!)

Here is an excerpt from a description of the pogrom printed in the New York Times:

"It is impossible to account the amounts of goods destroyed in a few hours. The hurrahs of the rioting. The pitiful cries of the victims filled the air. Wherever a Jew was met he was savagely beaten into insensibility. One Jew was dragged from a streetcar and beaten until the mob thought he was dead. The air was filled with feathers and torn bedding. Every Jewish household was broken into and the unfortunate Jews in their terror endeavored to hide in cellars and under roofs. The mob entered the synagogue, desecrated the biggest house of worship and defiled the Scrolls of the Law.

"The conduct of the intelligent Christians was disgraceful. They made no attempt to check the rioting. They simply walked around enjoying the frightful sport. On Tuesday, the third day, when it became known that the troops had received orders to shoot, the rioters ceased."

After two days of mayhem, the Czar said, "Okay enough -- mission accomplished. Now it's time to stop it." And it stopped.

Until the next time.

Between 1903 and 1907, times of great internal unrest in Russia, there were 284 pogroms with over 50,000 casualties. The level of violence was unbelievable.

**In four years, there were 284 pogroms with over 50,000 casualties.**

There was only so much of this kind of thing that people could take. The Jewish community was being devastated and people were looking for a way out. Jews were running out of the shtetls and joining all of the anarchist, communist, socialist, bundist movements that they could find in the hopes that they would be able to change the situation in Russia. Jews have been history's great idealists and during this time they were desperate to find some way of making things better. (We will cover their activism when we discuss the events surrounding World War I.)

Another thing that was happening in this time period was emigration. We see mass emigration of Jews out of Russia. Between 1881 and 1914, some 50,000 Jews left every year to a total of 2.5 million Jews.

Despite these migrations, the Jewish population of Russia stayed constant -- at about 5 million Jews, due the very high birthrate. Had these Jews not left Russia there would have been 7-8 million Jews there.

And it was America which absorbed most of the Jewish immigrants during this period of time.

## **GOLDEN LAND**

We might recall ([from Part 23](#)) when the Jews were exile by the Babylonians, the exile had happened in two stages. First the Babylonians took away 10,000 of the best and the brightest, and that turned out to be a blessing in disguise because when the Jews arrive in Babylon, there is a Jewish infrastructure in place. Yeshivas had been established, synagogues built, there was a kosher butcher and a *mikveh*. Jewish life could continue and as a result we saw hardly any assimilation during the Babylonian exile.

However, when the poor Jews of Russia arrived en masse in America at the end of the 19th century -- passing through the famous Ellis Island -- they found no Jewish infrastructure in place.

The Jews who had preceded them in the migration of the 1830s were German Jews (about 280,000 of them). These German Jews -- who resented the poorer Russian Jews -- were either Reform, (and did not believe that the Torah was God-given nor in any specific God-given law that Jews had to keep) or they were secular Jews who totally eschewed Jewish tradition.

Thus, the poor Russian Jews stepped into the Golden Land of Assimilation as we shall see in the next installment.



**Jews gained untold riches in America, but lost their heritage and spirituality**

When we last left off the Jews of America -- at the beginning of the 19th century -- there were only about 6,000 of them. The idea that there was freedom in America as long as you were not "too Jewish," kept most Jews away.

That changed in the 1830s when the Jews of Germany began to arrive.

The German Jews were not "too Jewish." They were either Reform Jews who had dropped the basic tenets of traditional Judaism (see Part 54 for details), or they were "enlightened" secular Jews who had dropped Judaism altogether.

By 1850 there were about 17,000 Jews living in America. By 1880 there were about 270,000.

**By 1850 there were about 17,000 Jews living in America; by 1880 there were about 270,000.**

Most of these Jews moved to the New York area, which at this time had a Jewish population of 180,000. It would soon grow to 1.8 million.

In New York City, the Jewish area was the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The ones who made it quickly moved up to the Upper East Side. And these Jews did remarkably well in the New World. Some famous names of those who made it rich

quick were:

- Marcus Goldman, founder of Goldman, Sachs & Co.
- Charles Bloomingdale, founder of Bloomingdale's department store
- Henry, Emanuel and Mayer Lehman, founders of Lehman Brothers
- Abraham Kuhn and Solomon Loeb, founders of the banking firm Kuhn, Loeb and Co.
- Jacob Schiff, Loeb's son-in-law and a major American financier
- Joseph Seligman, who started out as a peddler and who became one of the most important bankers in America.

These are just a few famous names. There were many others. (For their stories, see *Our Crowd* by Stephen Birmingham.)

## **AMERICAN REFORM MOVEMENT**

The German Jews of New York built the largest Reform synagogue in the world, Temple Emanuel on the Upper East Side, and many others. By 1880 there were about 200 synagogues in America, the majority (90%) of them Reform, because these were the Jews who were coming to America.

With this migration, the focus of the Reform Movement moved from Germany to the United States. In America, the Reform movement continued in the tradition of its German origins, spelling out its ideology in the famous "Pittsburgh Platform," which was drawn up and adopted in 1885 at a Pittsburgh convention of its leadership:

- "We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adopted to the view and habits of modern civilization."[HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)

- "We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state..."
- "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state..."

This last statement -- which detached the American Reform Movement from the 2,000-year-old Jewish longing to return to the Land of Israel (in imitation of the ideology espoused by the German Reform Movement) -- is the reason why early American Reform Jews did not support the Zionist Movement, or the foundation of the State of Israel, as we shall see in future installments.

## HEBREW UNION COLLEGE

The founding father of the American Reform Movement was Isaac Meyer Wise (1819 to 1900). He was a German Jewish immigrant who was the founder and the first president of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, which opened in 1875. It was the first American rabbinical seminary, and it had unusually liberal standards. Writes Joseph Telushkin in *Jewish Literacy* (p. 393):

"One issue that sets the Reform rabbinate apart... is its refusal to impose any religious standards on its rabbis. In many ways, this is a continuation of Reform's historical commitment to free inquiry. Today, quite literally, there is no religious action a Reform rabbi can take for which he or she would be thrown out of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the official body of Reform rabbis."

When, in 1883, the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College was ready to receive its diplomas, the seminary threw a lavish banquet.

**The graduation banquet of Hebrew Union College served one *traif* dish after another.**

The more traditional attendees were horrified when course after course presented one *traif* [non-kosher] dish after another: clams, soft-shell crabs, shrimps, frogs' legs, and ice cream following a meat meal.

(For more on this infamous banquet see *Critical Documents of Jewish History* edited by Ronald H. Isaacs and Kerry M. Olitzky, pp. 60-61.)

The so-called "*traif* banquet" compelled the more traditional Jews -- who thought that the Reform had gone too far but who did not want to be Orthodox -- to find another alternative, and it led to the founding of another movement within Judaism.

## THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT

In 1887, traditional Jews who were offended by the ideology of the Reform Movement founded an alternative to the Hebrew Union College. It was called the Jewish Theological Seminary, and it became the bastion of the new, purely-American, Conservative Movement.

The head of the Jewish Theological Seminary, a respected Jewish scholar from Cambridge, England, named Solomon Schechter (1850-1915) helped shape the ideology of the new movement. In his work, "The

Catholic Israel," Solomon Schechter spelled it out. (He chose a poor title for his work -- by "catholic" he meant "universal.")

"It is not the mere revealed Bible that is the first importance to the Jew but the Bible as it repeats itself in history. In other words, as it is interpreted by tradition. Another consequence of this conception of tradition is that neither scripture nor primitive Judaism but general custom which forms the real rule of practice. Liberty was always given to the great teachers of every generation to make modifications and innovations in harmony with the spirit of existing institutions. Hence a return to Mosaism would be illegal, pernicious and indeed, impossible."

In other words, the ideology of the Conservative Movement would be to uphold the Torah as the revealed word of God, but that the interpretation of that word of God need not uphold the tradition as passed down from Moses.

This was a dramatic departure from the traditional attitude toward the interpretation and application of Jewish law. One of the pillars of traditional Jewish belief was (and is) that those rabbis who lived closer to the revelation at Mount Sinai had a clearer understanding of Jewish law and its application, and therefore their decisions could NOT be discarded. New rulings on modern issues must take into account established principles. (See Part 39.)

When the Conservative Movement discarded this pillar of traditional Judaism, it opened a door to countless problems. The end result was that, although the founders of the movement felt Reform had gone too far, the behavior of their followers proved virtually indistinguishable from those of Reform Jews. (We will discuss these repercussions further when we take up the subject of assimilation in a future installment.)

## THE GREAT MIGRATIONS

This then was the spiritual state of the majority of American Jewry -- defined chiefly by the German Jews who migrated in the 1830s -- when the great migrations from Eastern Europe began around the turn of the century.

How many Jews came to America in this time period?

**The poorest of the poor came to America. They had nothing to lose except their Judaism.**

As noted earlier (see Part 57) between 1881 and 1914, some 50,000 Jews left Eastern Europe every year to a total of 2.5 million Jews, most of whom came to America.

These Jews were the poorest of the poor. They had little to lose in coming to America (except perhaps their Judaism).

And, alas, this is what happened. The great rabbis did not come among them, and lacking teachers and religious leaders to act against the pressures from the Americanized German Jews, these poor Eastern European Jews assimilated quickly. (We will examine the problem of assimilation in America in future installments.)

The pious, yeshiva-educated Jews did not come in the great migrations. For the most part, the rabbis -- fearing that America was the Golden Land of Assimilation disguised as the Golden Land of Economic Opportunity -- preached against immigration.

Writer Arthur Hertzberg in *The Jews of America* (p. 157):

"In 1893, the most distinguished moralist among the rabbis of Europe, Israel Meir Ha-Kohen [better known as the *Chafetz Chaim*]... went beyond exhortation; he ruled against mass migration to America. He knew that this emigration could no longer be stopped, but he pleaded with those who would heed the views of rabbis to prefer persecution in Russia to economic success in the United States...

"These opinions became so fixed that they would remain firm among the major leaders of European Orthodoxy even in the inter-war period, as the situation of European Jewry was radically worsening for all Jews, for all socio-economic classes."

## THE TIRED AND THE POOR

While the German Jews for the most part succeeded easily in America, life was much harder for the Eastern European Jews who came in the great migrations. We find, for example, at the beginning of the 1900s there were 64,000 families packed into 6,000 tenement houses of the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

**These poor, religious Jews of Eastern Europe reflected badly on the Reform German Jews that preceded them.** These poor, Yiddish-speaking, religious Jews reflected badly on the German Jews that came before them and who by this time had become quite Americanized. Therefore, the German Jews set out to get these Russian Jews to acculturate as quickly as possible and they invested heavily in this cause. Their underlying fear was anti-Semitism. This fear was real, because despite the religious tolerance of America, anti-Semitism was alive and doing well in the New World. There were no pogroms, but there was social isolation and other types of discrimination.

For example, in 1843, a dozen young men applied for membership to the Old Fellows Lodge, but were refused membership because they were Jews. (They organized a club of their own -- called the Independent Order of B'ani B'rith.)

Another example: in 1869, Joseph Seligman, the well-known banker, was refused hotel accommodations in Saratoga Springs, New York, the summer resort for the well-to-do of his day because he -- no matter how rich and famous -- was a Jew.

If those Jew who made it were not good enough to mingle with American non-Jews, one can just imagine how the unwashed immigrant masses were viewed.

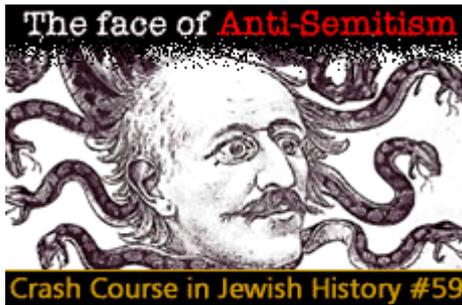
In 1894, Henry Adams (a descendant of John Quincy Adams) organized the Immigration Restriction League to limit the admission to America of "unhealthy elements" -- Jews being first among these.

In his famous book, *The Education of Henry Adams*, he wrote about those he was trying to keep out of America:

"Not a Polish Jew fresh from Warsaw or Cracow - not a furtive Jacob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs..."

He found many supporters for his cause, but he did not win. Indeed, one might say he lost when in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Jew -- Oscar Straus -- as the first Jew to serve in the U.S. cabinet, and as the secretary of commerce and labor (whose purview of responsibility was immigration).

However, the anti-Semites did not give up easily, as we will see next when we examine the factors which led to the baring of the evil face of anti-Semitism in the 20th century.



**Even in such civilized nation as France and the United States, anti-Semitism never died out.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

In this installment we will briefly examine the anti-Semitism that -- with the coming of the Enlightenment in the 18th century -- hid itself under the veneer of "civil" society, only to bare its face of evil in the Holocaust.

(For a more detailed treatment of anti-Semitism in general, click here for the [WHY THE JEWS](#) seminar)

Of course, in Russia and the Pale of Settlement of Eastern Europe, anti-Semitism never went underground (as we saw in Parts 56 and 57). But in the Western World the situation was different.

Some of the worst cases of anti-Semitism before the rise of the Nazis in Germany were instigated by the French, whose country was the birthplace of the Enlightenment.

It is shocking to learn, for example, that it was the French consul Ratti-Menton who brought a blood libel against the Jews in 1840, when a Capuchin monk disappeared in Damascus, Syria. In response to his accusations, the Syrian authorities seized more than sixty Jewish children to coerce their parents into confessing. Several Jews were arrested and tortured. Two died under torture and several others were permanently disabled; one "confessed."

Pressured by French authorities, the Syrians would have tried these Jews on false charges had not the Jewish world reacted. Jewish organizations instigated a protest by British and American leaders (including President Martin Van Buren) that caused the Syrians to drop the charges.

(Notably, the Reform Jews of Germany, who had distanced themselves from identifying with other Jews, as we saw in Part 54, did not participate in the protest.)

French anti-Semitism continued however.

In 1886, a virulently anti-Semitic book *La France Juive* became the most-widely read book in France. This was followed in 1892 by the founding of an anti-Semitic daily newspaper *La Libre Parole*. Writes Berel Wein in *Triumph of Survival* (p. 233):

"Nowhere was [*La Libre Parole*] more popular than with the officer corps of the French army ... Stung by the anarchists and pacifists of the left, humiliated by its complete defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the French army was frustrated, malevolent, and paranoid. One of its main enemies was the "Jewish influence" in French life. This made the military the logical candidate for an anti-Semitic incident. It would not be long in coming."

## THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

That anti-Semitic incident -- which became known in France as "L'Affaire" -- was the famous case of Alfred Dreyfus, a captain in the French Army who was falsely accused in 1894 of spying.

**Falsely accused, Alfred Dreyfus was paraded through a Paris mob jeering: "Death to the Jews!"**

The actual spy was not a Jew -- one Colonel Esterhazy -- but even though this fact was quickly discovered, the French army would not back away from its accusations for anti-Semitic reasons. "Secret" documents were produced and Dreyfus was tried and convicted of treason in a closed courtroom before a military tribunal. He was stripped of his rank and sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island. On January 3, 1895, he was paraded through the streets of Paris while a mob jeered: "Death to the Jews."

(One of those covering this fiasco was a Jewish journalist from Austria, Theodor Herzl, who was shocked to the core that Jew-hatred was so ingrained in the "civilized" French. It was then and there that Herzl, who was secular and quite assimilated, realized that the only safe place for the Jews was a land of their own -- the Land of Israel. This led Herzl to convene the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland, in 1897, at which the World Zionist Organization was established. We will discuss Zionism in greater detail in a future installment.)

Meanwhile, the travesty of the Dreyfus trial created a controversy. France's greatest writer, Emile Zola, published a stunning newspaper article entitled *J'Accuse* ("I Accuse"), charging the government with a miscarriage of justice. For this, Zola (who was not a Jew) was convicted of libel and had to flee to England.

Eventually, after another travesty of a trial in which Dreyfus was again convicted, he was finally pardoned and restored to his former military rank. (He was not fully exonerated until 1906!)

## WORLD WAR I

On June 28, 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated at Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist. One month later, after its humiliating demands were refused, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Other declarations of war followed quickly, and soon every major power in Europe was in the war. On one side were the Allies -- chiefly France, Britain, Russia, and the U.S.; on the other were the Central Powers -- Austria-Hungary, Germany and Turkey (i.e. Ottoman Empire).

World War I, which lasted four years, was an incredibly destructive war in which 10 million people died and another 20 million were wounded. This was largely because by the time World War I broke out, lethal weapons capable of killing huge numbers of people had been perfected. Soldiers no longer needed to stand close to each other to kill. Machine guns and heavy artillery did the job for them. And the end result was quite devastating.

As for the Jews, 1.5 million fought in World War I. Jews fought in the Austrian army, in the German army, in the Russian army, in the French army. Jews (aligned with their host nations) fought against other Jews in this conflict, and 140,000 Jews died.

Interestingly, World War I -- which without a doubt set the stage for the Holocaust -- began on August 1, 1914, corresponding to the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av (*Tisha B'Av*) the worst date in Jewish history. This was the same day on which the first and second Temples were destroyed, as well as many other terrible things that happened to the Jewish people as we have already seen.

In fact, World War I triggered a chain reaction that proved catastrophic to the Jews.

**World War I  
triggered a chain  
reaction that  
proved  
catastrophic to  
the Jews.**

The two major links in the chain reaction were the Russian Revolution and the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany.

Hitler would never have come to power were it not for Germany's defeat in World War I. As a result of that defeat, the punishing Versailles Treaty which brought Germany to its knees, and the world-wide depression following the war, Germany was thrown into economic chaos. But who was blamed for that economic plight by the "enlightened"

Germans? The Jew, of course.

World War II, which followed World War I by only 21 years, was in many ways a continuation of the same conflict, as we will learn.

## **RUSSIAN REVOLUTION**

Initially, the Czarist government did well in World War I. But as the war continued, the death toll and military setbacks proved more than Russia could handle.

The many years of corruption by the Czarist government had previously led in Russia to one aborted revolution in 1905. In 1917, the revolution was finally successful (though the actual fighting went on until 1921). The Czar was deposed and a Communist government came into power where it would stay until 1990.

Of course, the Jews -- who were among the most oppressed people in Russia, and who always gravitated to movements that professed to "change the world" -- were involved in a major way in the Russian Revolution. (We saw earlier that the founder of the Communist ideology was Karl Marx, a Jew who converted to Christianity and then abandoned all religion.)

The motto of the Communist Party -- "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" -- fit perfectly with Jewish teachings of social responsibility and social justice.

The Jews who joined the Communist party were not religious Jews, but the drive toward *tikun olam* ("repairing of the world") had not died. Indeed, in absence of religious expression, this drive (toward what is identified as a Messianic utopia in Judaism) dominated their Jewish souls.

Of course, just because secular Jews were involved in the Russian Revolution does not mean that the religious Jews of the shtetls were spared in the conflict. In fact, during the Russian Revolution huge numbers of Jews were killed.

**There would probably not have been a Russian Revolution without the Jews.** Still, we must give credit where credit is due. The leader of the Russian Revolution, Vladimir Illyitch Lenin (1870-1924) did try to root out anti-Semitism. He made a strong stand against it, because it was such an intrinsic policy of the Czarist government. Furthermore, Lenin was well aware that there would probably not have been a Russian Revolution without the Jews. Unfortunately, these Jewish Communists were following the Marxist dictum that "religion is the opiate of the masses," and they did their level best to eradicate Judaism as a religion out of Russia.

Here is an excerpt from a propaganda piece by *Yevseksiya* (the special department of the Soviet government set up to deal with Jews ) entitled "The Liquidation of Bourgeois Institutions" published in October 1918:

"The Jewish community has hitherto been dominated by members of the property class who want to keep the masses in the dark by superimposing a Hebrew culture upon them. While the upper classes have been sending their children to public schools they have provided only dark primary schools and synagogues for the offspring of the proletariat in which nothing but nonsense is taught. In the struggle against the authorized Jewish community no compromise can be made with the bourgeoisie."

So the Communist government of Russia, like the Czarist government of Russia Communism, embarked on a policy of forced secularization of Jews. (To be fair, they also did it to the Russian Orthodox Church.)

Thus the Jews of Russia were deliberately starved of their heritage, resulting in a huge Jewish population that is incredibly ignorant of Judaism. This, by the way, is a unique event in human history -- the deliberate secularization of a community to such a large extent for such a long period of time. (It was unique to the Soviet Union and later duplicated by other Communist regimes, particularly in China.)

## **STALIN AND TROTSKY**

When Lenin died in 1924, Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) seized power. In 1935, he initiated a series of purges which devastated Russia.

These purges made Stalin the second biggest mass murderer of the 20th century (after Mao Tze-tung), if we consider the sheer number of people he ordered killed and others whom he consigned to death in a vast network of labor camps. It is estimated that Stalin is responsible for the deaths of about 25 million people (twice as many as Hitler, though half as many as Mao).

An anti-Semite of the first order, even after the Holocaust, he was planning to deport 2-3 million Jews to Siberia where they would have been killed. However, he died under mysterious circumstances before he could put his plan into action.

**Trotsky, whose real name was Lev Davidovich Bronstein, was a leading organizer of the Bolsheviks.**

However, he did succeed in purging all the Jews out of the Communist government of Russia. The most famous of these was Leon Trotsky (1879-1940). The most important Jew in the Russian Revolution, Trotsky -- whose real name was Lev Davidovich Bronstein -- was a leading organizer of the Red Army. He engineered the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 along with Lenin. When Lenin died he and Stalin were rivals for succession.

Stalin won and first ousted Trotsky as commissar of war, then expelled him from the party, and finally deported him from Russia -- that happened in 1929. Trotsky survived in exile for more than 10 years; he was murdered in Mexico City in 1940 on Stalin's orders.

## AMERICAN ANTI-SEMITISM

Thus far, we have covered the open murderous anti-Semitism of the Russians and the insidious "intellectual" anti-Semitism of the French. But what about the land of tolerance -- America?

In 1913, in Atlanta, Georgia, a Jew named Leo Frank was falsely accused of the murder of a 13-year-old Christian girl. So strong was the anti-Semitism in the American South that the testimony of a black man -- a unique event in this racist region -- was permitted against a white man. But, of course, the white man was a Jew.

Ironically, the black "witness" was the murderer -- a fact that he had confessed to his own attorney, but this was kept secret. There had also been a real witness but he did not come forward until many years later.

Frank was convicted and sentenced to death, but the governor of Georgia, John Slaton, convinced that Frank was innocent, commuted his sentence.

Then a horrible thing happened.

**A Georgia mob kidnapped innocent Leo Frank from prison and lynched him.**

A Georgia mob kidnapped Frank from prison and lynched him. The lynching was photographed and made into postcards which sold briskly.

Not until 1986 -- 73 years later! -- was Frank awarded posthumous pardon by the state of Georgia.

The Frank case led to the founding of the Anti-Defamation League by the B'nai B'rith. It became the leading Jewish group fighting anti-Semitism in America, and it had a lot of work on its hands, especially after 1918, the end of World War I, and in 1929 when the stock market crashed, and things heated up for the Jews in America.

As we mentioned in our discussion of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (see Part 57), one of the big promulgators of anti-Semitism in America was Henry Ford, who spent a lot of his own money to get the Protocols translated into Engl



**While Nazi Germany proceeded to systematically round up and execute Jews, the rest of the world closed its eyes and its doors.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

ish and distributed in America as widely as possible.

The *Protocols* became the second biggest selling book in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s (after the Bible).

The Ford Motor Company's plant in Dearborn, Michigan, had a sign posted in its parking lot:

"JEWS ARE TRAITORS TO AMERICA AND SHOULD NOT BE TRUSTED BY GENTILES. JEWS TEACH COMMUNISM, JEWS TEACH ATHEISM, JEWS DESTROY CHRISTIANITY, JEWS CONTROL THE PRESS, JEWS PRODUCE FILTHY MOVIES, JEWS CONTROL MONEY."

Henry Ford was not the only one. There were others.

There were several conservative Christian political parties which were strongly anti-Semitic for example, William Pelley's "Silver Shirts." An anti-Semitic newspaper, Gerald B. Winrod's *The Defender* had 110,000 subscribers.

These American anti-Semites were fledgling fascists. Under the guise of patriotism, they championed the idea that Jews were the underlying cause of the economic woes of America -- such as the stock market crash of 1929 -- because it was the Jews who controlled business and banking. This kind of anti-Semitism rivaled that of Europe in the same period, but unlike Europe never took hold with the same fatal consequences.

But all this Jew-hatred did set the stage for the appeasement of Hitler when he took hold of power in Germany. It also was one of the primary reasons why America did not do more to save the Jews once they began to flee the Holocaust, as we shall see next.

As we begin to discuss this most painful of subjects to the Jewish people, please keep in mind that this is a vast subject. At the moment there are some 1,200 books in print examining why it happened, how it happened, and all the details in between.

Some of the classics that give insight into the Holocaust are:

- *The Holocaust* by Martin Gilbert
- *The War Against the Jews* by Lucy S. Dawidowicz
- *Night* by the Nobel Prize Winner Elie Wiesel
- *The Diary of A Young Girl* by Anne Frank
- *Hitler's Willing Executioners* by Daniel J. Goldhagen

- *Destruction of European Jews* by Raul Hilberg

Alternatively one can visit:

- Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, Israel
- The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.
- The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles

On the web, try:

- [www.aish.com/holocaust/default.asp](http://www.aish.com/holocaust/default.asp)

A Crash Course in Jewish History cannot possibly do justice to this devastating event in which a nation (Nazi Germany) targeted a people (the Jews) and systematically and with breath-taking cruelty killed 6 million of them. The word "genocide" was coined to describe it. This word did not exist in the English language before this.

**The Holocaust thrusts a question into the face of all of humanity: how could civilized people let this happen?**

Not only did Nazi Germany set out to eliminate the Jews from the face of the earth, virtually no other country on earth lifted a finger to stop them.

Of course, there were isolated incidents of great heroism on the part of some non-Jews, but history stands in mute testimony that this was a paltry effort. Most did nothing as the Jews died.

The Holocaust thrusts a question into the face of all of humanity: how could civilized people let this happen?

We have a clue to where the answer to this question lies from Adolf Hitler himself:

"Yes, we are barbarians! We want to be barbarians! It is an honorable title ... Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing men from ... the dirty and degrading self-mortifications of a false vision (a Jewish invention) called 'conscience' and 'morality.'"

(See Hermann Rauschning's books: *Hitler Speaks and Voice of Destruction*.)

## ADOLF HITLER

To begin with we have to explode some major myths about Hitler.

Adolf Hitler, who was born in Braunau, Austria in 1889, had nothing but positive interactions with Jews in his childhood and youth, contrary to popular belief that tries to blame his actions on some early vendetta. In his youth, when he was a struggling artist, many of the people who supported him were Jews. Even more, some important figures in his life were Jewish -- like his family doctor or his commander in World War I who nominated him for the Iron Cross.

And yet, despite these positive experiences, Hitler had a deep-seated hatred of the Jews. In terms of Jewish history, the only people who had similar pathological hatred, were the nation of Amalek.

(Amalek, as we might recall from Part 16, was the ultimate enemy of the Jewish people in history. Amalek's major ambition was to rid the world of the Jews and their moral influence and return the planet to idolatry, paganism, and barbarism.)

**Hitler's hatred of the Jews was not illogical.**

Hitler's hatred of the Jews -- like the Amalekite's hatred of the Jews -- was not illogical. We can even call it rational, in that he had a reason for it that he understood very well, as we shall see.

Hitler also was not insane. He had his neuroses, but he was not crazy. In fact, he was a brilliant political manipulator. We can certainly say a lot of horrible things about him, but Hitler was one of the greatest public speakers in human history. If you understood German, you'd understand while watching tapes of his speeches why those blonde, blue-eyed Germans cheered so heartily a man whose very appearance contradicted everything he preached. There he was with black hair, as far away as he could come in appearance from the Aryans, the master race with which he wanted to populate the earth. And yet they gave him their loyalty and gave up their lives for him.

Hitler was democratically elected into office in 1932, and a year later he became Chancellor of Germany. Immediately after he came to power, he set up Dachau -- not as a concentration camp for Jews, that would come later, but as a place to put his political opponents. Little by little, he took a very sophisticated democratic system of the Weimar German Republic and turned it into a totalitarian state.

His dictatorship in place, Hitler embarked on a policy of bullying his way into taking over much of Europe.

Initially Europe, and certainly the United States, did nothing. He absorbed Austria into Germany in 1938, by mutual consent. Then he took over most of Czechoslovakia, a region called the Sudetenland, without the consent of the Czechs but with the blessing of European powers - particularly England and France. The Prime Minister of England at that time, Neville Chamberlain, showed how little England cared about the problems of Eastern Europe in this speech:

"How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing."

England and France negotiated a pact with Hitler in Munich on October 29, 1938, promising to look the other way. Afterwards Chamberlain, satisfied Europe would be safe from Hitler, declared:

"I believe it is peace in our time ... peace with honor."

A year after this infamous statement, World War II broke out -- a war in which 50 million people would die -- showing how naïve is a leader who thinks that by placating evil peace can be won.

## **OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE JEWS**

Some three years before he made his strides into Europe, Hitler was already putting into place his program to get rid of the Jews.

It began in 1935 with the Nuremberg Laws. These laws basically cancelled all the rights that Jews had won in Germany post-Enlightenment.

For so many years before the Enlightenment Jews were hated because they were different and refused to assimilate. Post-Enlightenment, (as we saw in Parts 53 and 54) in the very country where the Jews assimilated the most easily, they were now hated because they were blending in too well. Hitler's ultimate nightmare was that Jews would intermarry with Germans and poison the gene-pool of the master race.

Hence laws such as these were passed to preserve "the purity of German blood":

- "Marriages between Jews and subjects of German or kindred blood are forbidden."
- "Extramarital relationships between Jews and subjects of German or kindred blood are forbidden."
- "A Reich citizen can only be a state member who is a German of German blood and who shows through his conduct and is both desirous and fit to serve in the faith of the German people and Reich. The Reich citizen is the only holder of political rights."
- "A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He cannot exercise the right to vote. He cannot occupy public office."
- "Jews are forbidden to display the Reich's national flag or to show the national colors."

Systematically, Jews lost their citizenship, their political rights, their economic rights.

Then the violence started.

## **CLOSED DOORS**

The first explosion of major Nazi violence against the Jews was *Kristallnacht* -- "the night of broken glass." It happened on November 9, 1938. That night 191 synagogues were destroyed and 91 Jews were killed, many beaten to death.

Afterwards some 30,000 Jews were arrested and fined a billion marks (equal to about 400 million dollars) for the damage that was caused by the Germans.

This was really the writing on the wall for the Jews. At this time many tried to get out of Germany. Unfortunately, very few places in the world would accept them. For example, when the Prime Minister of Canada was asked how many Jews Canada should take, his response was "None is too many."

**The Foreign  
Minister of  
Canada was  
asked how many**

**Jews Canada should take; his answer: "None is too many."** America took in only 200,000 Jews due to the anti-Semitism that we discussed in Part 59. Even when it was clear the Germans were persecuting the Jews, the American State Department had such strict criteria for allowing Jews into the country that 75% of the spaces that were allotted to Jews technically, by American law, were never even taken. Amazingly, so many Jews who in theory could go to America couldn't make the requirements.

All told, about 800,000 Jews actually found refuge in various places in the world. But the majority couldn't get out.

(For more on this subject read *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* by Arthur D. Morse. It is a stinging indictment.)

## WORLD WAR II

World War II started on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland.

That brought England and France into the war in opposition to Germany. On June 22, 1940, France surrendered to Germany, leaving England to fight it alone. Eventually the U.S. would join in, although not until 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

By that time, virtually all of Europe was in Hitler's control. It happened quickly because the Germans were so good at waging war. They had perfected the art of concentrated armored attacks with air support - they called it *blitzkrieg*, meaning "lightning war." They were unstoppable.

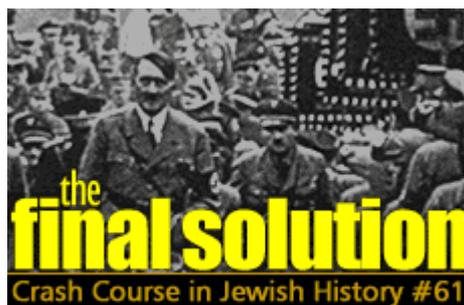
They were stopped, of course -- first and foremost by the Russians and secondly by the British and Americans -- though it took years at a cost of many lives.

In the beginning of the conflict, Hitler had signed a non-aggression pact with Stalin but in June 1941, he violated it and invaded the Soviet Union anyway. Here, too, the Germans were initially very successful, because Stalin had purged his whole army of all his competent generals -- he had killed them all.

**The Einsatzgruppen, special German units, began executing Jews.** Basically as fast as the Germans could walk is as fast as they advanced into the Soviet Union. And there, of course, was where a great many Jews resided. Immediately, Hitler began his campaign to eliminate them. The *Einsatzgruppen*, special German units, began systematically executing people and some 1.5 million Jews were killed by them alone. They were rounded up, usually over a big ravine or pit which they were often forced to dig themselves, and then they were machine-gunned over it. Those who did not die immediately from their gunshot wounds were buried alive.

This is what happened at the Babi Yar forest near Kiev in the Ukraine. There, according to German "official" records 33,782 men, women and children were executed over a ravine in September of 1941.

But the worst was yet to come.



**Hitler was mindlessly focused on his goal: the elimination of all Jews from the planet.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

By the beginning of 1942 the Germans had close to 9 million Jews under their control (out of a total of 11 million Jews living in Europe and the Soviet Union). And, of course, it was their plan to murder them all.

Already, the *Einsatzgruppen* killing squads had machine-gunned 1.5 million Jews, (as we saw in Part 60) but this was not an efficient way of killing so many more millions of people -- it was too messy, too slow, and it wasted too many bullets.

So the Germans embarked on a policy called the "Final Solution" which was decided upon at a conference held in Wannsee, near Berlin, on January 20, 1942:

"Instead of immigration there is now a further possible solution to which the Fuhrer has already signified his consent. Namely deportation to the East. Although this should be regarded merely as an interim measure, it will provide us with the practical experience which will be especially valuable in connection with the future final solution. In the course of the practical implementation of the final solution Europe will be combed from West to East."

## **DEATH CAMPS**

The Final Solution -- the systematic gassing of millions of Jews -- was put into place primarily by the top Gestapo brass, namely Adolph Eichmann and Reinhardt Heidrich.

Of the 24 concentration camps (besides countless labor camps), six specific death camps were set up. They were:

- Auschwitz - where 2 million were murdered
- Chelmno - where 360,000 were murdered
- Treblinka - where 840,000 were murdered
- Sobibor - where 250,000 were murdered
- Maidenek - where 200,000 were murdered
- Belzec - where 600,000 were murdered

Auschwitz is the most famous because there the killing machine was the most efficient. There, between 1941 and 1944, 12,000 Jews a day were gassed to death. In addition to the Jews, hundreds of thousands of others deemed threats to the Nazi regime or considered racially inferior or socially deviant were also murdered.

**As if cold-blooded murder of millions of Jews was not enough, it was done with extreme, perverse cruelty.**

As if cold-blooded murder of millions of Jews was not enough, it was done with extreme, perverse cruelty. The victims were packed into cattle trains with standing-room only and without food or water, or heat in the winter, or toilet facilities. Many did not arrive at the camps alive. Those who did arrive at their destination had their heads shaved, with the hair to be used for stuffing mattresses. Stripped of all clothing, most were herded naked into the gas chambers.

Bizarre and sadistic "medical experiments" were done on many victims without the use of anesthetics. Some people were sewn together to make artificial Siamese twins. Others were submerged in freezing water to test the limits of human endurance.

The Jews were even debased in death. Gold fillings were torn from the mouths of the corpses. In some instances soap was made from their rendered bodies and lampshades from their skins.

Some of those deemed strong enough were used as slave labor for the Nazi war effort. On starvation rations, they were pushed to their physical limit and then killed or sent to the death camps.

## **RESISTANCE EFFORTS**

Any attempt at escape or resistance was met with brutal reprisals. For example, on March 14, 1942 a number of Jews escaped from a work detail in IJsa, Ukraine, and joined the partisans. In revenge, all old and sick Jews were shot in the street and 900 more herded into a building and burned alive.

Sam Halpern, a survivor of the Kamionka labor camp explained: "I would never consider escaping. I will not have others killed because of my decision."

Nevertheless, in at least five camps and twenty ghettos, there were uprisings.

The most famous attempt was the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion. On April 19, 1943 the Nazis began the liquidation of the ghetto -- that is, shipping off Jews to Auschwitz -- and were met with armed resistance.

Mordechai Anielewicz, the 23-year-old leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, wrote in his last letter (dated April 23, 1943):

"What happened is beyond our wildest dreams. Twice the Germans fled from our ghetto. One of our companies held out for forty minutes and the other, for over six hours ... I have no words to describe to you the conditions in which Jews are living. Only a few chosen ones will hold out; all the rest will perish sooner or later. The die is cast. In the bunkers in which our comrades are hiding, no candle can be lit for lack of air ... The main thing is: My life's dream has come true; I have lived to see Jewish resistance in the ghetto in all its greatness and glory."

But in the end, the Jews were no match for the artillery, machine guns, and troops of the Germans. (Compare 1,358 German rifles against 17 among the Jews). The end result was that the entire ghetto was destroyed with those hiding in bunkers burned alive.

## **UNPRECEDENTED**

The Nazi attempt to deliberately, systematically eliminate an entire people from the planet was unprecedented in human history.

Hitler targeted the Jews for a specific reason, which was not just racial. The elimination of the Jews had a unique "status" in Hitler's master plan. While he certainly killed millions of others (gypsies, homosexuals, etc.) he made exceptions for all these groups. The only group for which no exception was made was the Jews -- they all had to die.

Writes Lucy Dawidowicz in *the War Against the Jews*:

"The final solution transcended the bounds of modern historical experience. Never before in modern history had one people made the killing of another the fulfillment of an ideology, in whose pursuit means were identical with ends. History has, to be sure, recorded terrible massacres and destructions that one people perpetrated against another. But all, however cruel and unjustifiable, were intended to achieve an instrumental ends, being means to ends and not ends in and of themselves."

In other words, the elimination of the Jews was not the means to an end. It was an end in itself. What that end was Hitler explained himself in his writings and speeches.

**Hitler understood that before the Jewish ethical vision came along, the world operated like a jungle.** Hitler believed that before monotheism and the Jewish ethical vision came along, the world operated according to the laws of nature and evolution: survival of the fittest. The strong survived and the weak perished. But in a world operating according to a Divinely-dictated ethical system -- where a God-given standard applies and not anyone's might -- the weak did not need to fear the strong. As Hitler saw it, the strong were emasculated and he blamed the Jews for this. His plan was to take over the world and set up a barbarian master race - a plan that he came very close to executing. But to do so, he had to get rid of the Jews first. As he said:

"The Ten Commandments have lost their validity... Conscience is a Jewish invention. It is a blemish like circumcision ... The struggle for world domination is fought entirely between us, between the Germans and the Jews."

(See Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks*, pp. 220, 242.)

Everything in his war machine was set up for this purpose. At the very end, when the Allies were destroying the German Army, he was not so much bothered by this as he was by the fact that there were Jews still alive.

He diverted trains that were badly needed to transport more soldiers to the Russian front, where he was losing the war, just to send more Jews to Auschwitz. To him, the greater enemy was the Jew.

The last thing he said before committing suicide in his bunker in April 30, 1945 was to urge that the fight continue against the enemy of all humanity -- the Jews. His last dispatch read:

"Above all, I enjoin the leaders of the nation and those under them to uphold the racial laws of their full extent and to oppose mercilessly the universal poisoner of all peoples, International Jewry."

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is important to note here that the anti-Semitism which drove the Nazis to understate the unthinkable did not exist in isolation. It was not even Hitler's personal philosophy.

We might recall (see Part 53) that it was one of Germany's biggest thinkers of the 19th century -- Wilhelm Marr -- who coined the term "anti-Semitism." In so doing he wanted to distinguish hatred of the Jews as members of a religion (anti-Judaism) from hatred of the Jews as members of a race/nation (anti-Semitism). In 1879, he wrote a book called *The Victory of Judaism over Germandom*, a runaway best-seller; in it Marr warned:

"There is no stopping them [the Jews]. Are there no clear signs that the twilight of the Jews is setting in? No. Jewry's control of society and politics as well as its domination of religious and ecclesiastical thought is still in the prime of its development. Yes, through the Jewish nation Germany will become a world power, a western new Palestine. And this will happen not through violent revolution but through the compliance of the people. We should not reproach the Jewish nation. It fought against the western world for 1,800 years and finally conquered it. We were vanquished. The Jews were late in their assault on Germany but once started there was no stopping them ...

"I am marshalling my last remaining strength in order to die peacefully as one who will not surrender and who will not ask for forgiveness. The historical fact that Israel became the leading social political superpower in the 19th century lies before us. We have amongst us a flexible, tenacious, intelligent foreign tribe that knows how to bring abstract reality into play in many different ways. Not individual Jews but the Jewish spirit and Jewish consciousness have overpowered the world. All this is the consequence of a cultural history so unique in its way, so grand that every day polemic can achieve nothing against it. With the entire force of its armies the proud Roman Empire did not achieve that which Semitism has achieved in the West and particularly in Germany."

Keep in mind that when Marr wrote these words, the State of Israel did not exist, nor was there even a hint in the geo-political situation that it might come into being anytime soon. Marr, in speaking of the Jewish national threat, was speaking about the great ideological struggle of Jewish worldview versus paganism, which had been playing out throughout Jewish history. We saw it between the Greeks and the Jews (Part 27) and between the Romans and the Jews (Part 33).

Hitler saw it as continuing between the Germans and the Jews.

## LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS

Hitler's understanding of the role of the Jews in the world was not warped. His was, in fact, the traditional Jewish understanding. When the Jews accepted the Torah at Mt. Sinai, they became the chosen people whose role and responsibility was to bring a God-given code of morality to the world. They were to be "the light unto the nations" in the words of prophet Isaiah.

And this is what Hitler wanted to bring an end to, because as long as there were even a few Jews left on earth, they were going to continue that God-given mission:

"If only one country, for whatever reason, tolerates a Jewish family in it, that family will become the germ center for fresh sedition. If one little Jewish boy survives without any Jewish education, with no synagogue and no Hebrew school, it [Judaism] is in his soul. Even if there had never been a synagogue or a Jewish school or an Old Testament, the Jewish spirit would still exist and exert its influence. It has been there from the beginning and there is no Jew, not a single one, who does not personify it."

(*Hitler's Apocalypse* by Robert Wistrich, p. 122.)

When we look at it from that perspective we get a completely different view of what the Holocaust was about. Traditional Judaism says that it is part of the ultimate struggle between good and evil which had been going on since the beginning of time.

## LIBERATION

In the end, Hitler did not succeed in his plan to completely eliminate the Jews. He succeeded however in murdering over one third of the world's Jewish population and teaching the world the meaning of evil.

When the Allied armies (Russians from the east and the Americans and British from the west) liberated the camps at the close of the war, they were met with scenes of unspeakable horror.

The films made by the Allied forces upon entering the camps were so horrible that they were not publicly shown for many years.

Liberation did not end the deaths of Jews.

### **Liberation did not end the deaths of Jews.**

In spite of Allied efforts to save them, many victims perished after liberation from weakness and illness. In the Belson camp, 13,000 died after the British liberators arrived.

Some who did survive met death at the hands of non-Jewish partisans or peasants when they left the camps. Some tried to reach their old homes, but found nothing left or that they now had new tenants who were very opposed to the return of the original owners.

The death total was unimaginable.

Intentionally using minimum figures and probable underestimates, Sir Martin Gilbert (in his work *The Holocaust*) finds that at least 5,950,000 Jews were murdered between 1939 and 1945.

This figure represents nearly half of the entire Jewish population of Europe.

Eastern European Jewry had been virtually wiped out.

But while the Holocaust brought an end to the Jewish community of Eastern Europe, it brought about - in an indirect way - the rebirth of the Land of Israel, as a Jewish state for the first time in 2,000 years. How it became the great refuge for the Jews in the modern period we will take up in the next installment.



**The re-birth of Israel is an unprecedented phenomenon in human history.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The yearning for the land of Israel never left the Jewish people.

- We see it in Psalms that Jews constantly recited: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem ..." or "When the Lord brings about our return to Zion, we will be like dreamers..."
- In the statements of the rabbis, such as this one by Rabbi Nachman of Breslav: "Wherever I go I'm always going to Israel."
- We see it in Jewish poetry, such as that of Yehuda HaLevi: "My heart is in the East but I am in the most far West."
- In holiday rituals: "Next year in Jerusalem."
- And, of course, in countless blessings recited daily: "Have mercy, Lord our God, on Israel your people, on Jerusalem, your city, on Zion... Rebuild Jerusalem, your holy city, speedily in our days, and bring us there to rejoice in its rebuilding..."

In other words, the land of Israel was always a place in the minds of the Jews where the Jewish national potential could someday be fulfilled.

But, as a practical reality, this did not begin to happen in a significant way until the birth of modern Zionism, not as a religious, but as a political movement.

The re-birth of Israel is an unprecedented phenomenon in human history. That a people should go into exile, be dispersed, and yet survive for 2,000 years, that they should be a nation without a national homeland and come back again, that they should re-establish that homeland is a miraculous, singular event. No one ever did such a thing.

## **BRIEF OVERVIEW**

Before we discuss the Jews' return to their homeland, let us then look back at history and review briefly what had been happening in the Land of Israel from the time that the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, (See Parts 35 thru 37.)

Subsequently, Jerusalem was leveled, rebuilt on the Roman model, and re-named Aeolia Capitolina. The land of Israel was re-named Palestine (after the extinct Phillistines, some of the worst enemies of the Jews in ancient times).

From that time, Jews were barred from Jerusalem. The Byzantine Empire (the Constantinople-based Christian version of the Roman Empire) continued the earlier policy, and Jews were not allowed into Jerusalem until the Muslims conquered the Byzantines in 638 CE. (See Part 42.)

Once the Muslims took over the Land of Israel, they held onto it with the brief exception of the period of the Crusades. (See Part 45.)

**During their 1,300-year hold on the land of Israel, the Muslims made little attempt to establish themselves here.**

The Turkish Ottoman Empire held onto power here the longest: from 1518 to 1917. Yet, during all this time, the Muslims generally treated the Holy Land as a backwater province. There was virtually no attempt to make Jerusalem, which was quite run-down, an important capital city nor to improve its infrastructure (save for the re-building of the walls of the city in 16th century during the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.) Similarly, only limited building went on in the rest of the land, which was barren and not populated by many Arabs. The only major new city built was Ramle, which served as the Ottoman administrative center.

Mark Twain who visited Israel in 1867 described it like this in *Innocents Abroad*:

We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds - a silent, mournful expanse... A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Tabor safely... We never saw a human being on the whole route. We pressed on toward the goal of our crusade, renowned Jerusalem. The further we went the hotter the sun got and the more rocky and bare, repulsive and dreary the landscape became... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country. No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem... Jerusalem is mournful, dreary and lifeless. I would not desire to live here. It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land... Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes."

## EARLY MIGRATIONS

During the time of the Muslims, life for the Jews here was for the most part easier than under the Christians.

In 1210, following the demise of the Crusaders, several hundred rabbis, known as the Ba'alei Tosefot, re-settled in Israel. This marked the emergence of the first Ashkenazic European community in Israel.

In 1263, the great philosopher Nachmanides also known as the Ramban, established a small Sephardic community on Mount Zion which was outside the walls. (See Part 47.) Later, in the 1400s, that community moved inside the walls and they established the Ramban Synagogue which still exists today.

When Nachmanides came to Jerusalem there was already a vibrant Jewish community in Hebron, though the Muslims did not permit them entry into the Cave of the Machpela (where the Jewish Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried). Indeed, this ban continued until the 20th century.

More Jews started to migrate to Israel following their expulsion from Spain in 1492. In the 16th century, large numbers of Jews migrated to the northern city of Tzfat (also known as Safed) and it became the center of Jewish mysticism -- the Kabbalah.

In mid-1700s a student of the Ba'al Shem Tov by the name of Gershon Kitover started the first Hassidic community in Israel. This community was part of what was called Old Yishuv. (Today, when in the Old City of Jerusalem, you can visit the "Old Yishuv Court Museum" and learn some fascinating facts about it.)

By 1880, there were about 40,000 Jews, living in the land of Israel among some 400,000 Muslims.

One of the major figures of this time period was Moses Montefiore (1784 to 1887) -- the first Jew to be knighted in Britain.

Montefiore had made his fortune with the Rothschilds, who struck it rich in the Napoleonic Wars. They used carrier pigeons and they knew about the victory at Waterloo before anyone else; this is how they made a killing on the English stock market.

With his fortune made by age 40, Montefiore embarked on a career in philanthropy, becoming a tireless worker for the Jewish community of Israel.

**Most of the Jews then lived in what is today called the "Moslem Quarter."** At that time, most of the Jews then lived in what is now called the Old City of Jerusalem, specifically in what is now called the "Moslem Quarter." The main entrance to the city for the Jews was through Damascus Gate and of the many synagogues in Jerusalem, most of them were in the "Moslem Quarter" close to the site where the Temple stood on Mount Moriah.

The city was hugely overcrowded and sanitary conditions were terrible, but due to the lawlessness of that time, people were afraid to built homes and live outside.

Montefiore built the first settlement outside the walls of the Old City, called "Yemin Moshe" in 1858. He opened the door and more neighborhoods were built in the New City. One of the earliest ones, built in 1875, was Mea Shearim (which, contrary to popular opinion does not mean "Hundred Gates" but "Hundredfold" as in Genesis 26:12.)

Besides Montefiore, another extremely important personality in this period of time was Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845 to 1934).

Rothschild was a man who more than anyone else, financially made the re-settlement of Jews in the land of Israel possible. During his lifetime he spent 70 million francs of his own money on various agricultural settlements and business enterprises such as the Carmel Winery for example. So important and generous was Rothschild that he was nicknamed *HaNadiv HaYaduah*, "The Famous Contributor."

Although Rothschild was quite assimilated and disconnected from the Jewish yearning for the land, he was greatly influenced by Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever, who was one of the first religious Zionists from Poland.

Mohilever converted Rothschild to his ideology and from that point on the rich banker began to look at Israel as an "investment." He made it possible for thousands of Jews to return to the land and survive here in those days.

## EARLY POLITICAL ZIONISM

We do not see the appearance of political Zionism until late in the 19th century as a reaction to the intolerable persecution of the Jews of Russia.

The early political Zionists, being largely secular, did not feel a special yearning for Israel rooted in tradition or religion, rather they felt that the Land of Israel was the only place where Jews could create a national

identity, regain their pride and productivity, and hopefully escape the horrible anti-Semitism of Czarist Russia and other places.

One of the main organizations involved in early political Zionism was called *Hibbat Zion* "the love of Zion" founded in 1870. (Its members were called *Hovevei Zion*, "lovers of Zion.")

A major personality among the *Hovevi Zion* was Judah Leob Pinsker (1821-1891). A Polish doctor, Pinsker started out as one of the *Maskilim*, a group which wanted their fellow Jews to drop Judaism and merge with Russian culture in the hope that if Jews were socially accepted, then Russian anti-Semitism would disappear. (See Part 56.) But after the pogroms following the assassination of Czar Alexander in 1881, he and many other of the *Maskilim* came to the conclusion that their efforts were futile and anti-Semitism was never going to disappear. Like Theodor Herzl later, Pinsker was shocked at the depth of European anti-Semitism. The only solution, he came to believe, was for Jews to live in their own national homeland.

Pinsker published his ideas in a pamphlet called "Auto-Emancipation." In it he penned these memorable words:

"We must reconcile ourselves to the idea that the other nations, by reason of their inherent natural antagonism, will forever reject us."

## FIRST ALIYAH

In 1882, another important organization was formed in Russia. It was called *Bilu*, an acronym of the opening words from verse in Isaiah (2:5): *Beit Yaacov lechu Venelech* meaning, "House of Jacob, come, let us go..."

*Bilu* was very active in the early settlement movement, what came to be called the "First *Aliyah*" -- the first large migration of Jews from Russia to the Land of Israel.

*Aliyah* means "ascent." To migrate to Israel -- to make *aliyah* -- means to come from a low place and to "go up."

**To migrate to Israel -- to make *aliyah* -- means to come from a low place and to "go up."**

The year 1882 marked the first such *aliyah*, when Jews began to arrive in the land of Israel in droves -- some 30,000 Jews came in two waves between 1882-1891 and founded 28 new settlements.

(Among these new settlements was Hadera, which has been so much in the news lately as the repeated target of vicious terrorist attacks.)

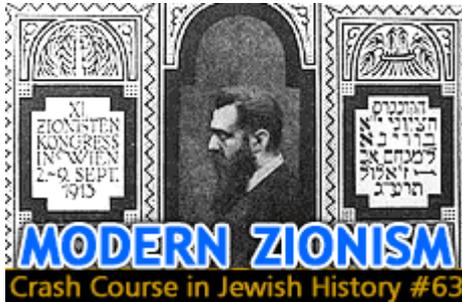
Hundreds of thousands of acres were purchased by these early Zionists from absentee Arab landowners who usually lived elsewhere in the Middle East. The majority of the lands purchased were in areas that were neglected and considered un-developable -- such as the sandy coastal plain or the swampy Hula Valley in the north. Amazingly, and with much effort, these early settlers made the barren land bloom again.

What drove many of these early immigrants was an idealism that was captured by Zev Dugnov, a member of *Bilu*:

"My final purpose is to take possession of Palestine and to restore to the Jews the political independence for which they have now been denied for two thousand years. Don't laugh. It is not a mirage. It does not

matter if that splendid day will come in 50-years' time or more. A period of 50 years is no more than a moment of time for such an undertaking."

In fact, it would take 66 years. Meanwhile, Jews would continue to come, reclaim the land and build a strong political movement demanding back their ancient homeland.



**The First Zionist Conference, held in 1897, was a major event in the establishment of the modern State of Israel.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

We cannot study Zionism without studying Theodor Benyamin Ze'ev Herzl (1860-1904).

We already saw in Part 59, as a correspondent during the Alfred Dreyfus affair, he was shocked to hear the civilized French screaming "Death to the Jews!" He determined then and there that the solution to anti-Semitism was the establishment of a Jewish national state. He wrote a book about it, entitled *Der Judenstaat* ("The Jewish State") in which he described his vision for a Jewish homeland.

Although Zionism was not his invention, Herzl became the driving force of the movement. There were several factors that made him the ideal leader:

**Although Zionism was not his invention, Herzl became the driving force of the movement.**

- he was from Western Europe (as opposed to Eastern Europe) -- a part of the world considered to be more enlightened;
- he was very well educated;
- he could write well and speak well;
- he was wealthy and politically well connected;
- he had a charismatic presence and a regal stature --he behaved like a leader.

In 1897, on August 29th, Herzl convened the First Zionist Conference in Basel, Switzerland. Present were 197 delegates from 16 countries who formed the initial Zionist policy. This gathering proved a major event in the establishment of the modern State of Israel.

Afterward Herzl wrote in his diary:

"Were I to sum up the Basel Congress in one word which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly, it would be this: At Basel I founded the Jewish State. Perhaps in five years but certainly in 50 everyone will know it."

(See *The Siege* by Connor Cruise O'Brian.)

In fact, the State of Israel was declared on May 14, 1948 - 50 years and 9 months later.

Unfortunately, Herzl did not see it happen. He died at age 44 of a heart attack following the stormy controversy involving the proposal that the Jewish people make their home in Uganda. Herzl, who had provisionally supported the idea, settled the controversy convincing his detractors that he had remained faithful to Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. Thus, he safeguarded the unity of the Zionist movement, but his weak heart gave out in the process.

Herzl's is a tragic story. He died having given his life for the cause and he died bankrupt having spent all his money on his cause.

Perhaps the saddest thing is that he left no descendants to carry on after him. His wife Julia tried to carry on, but she died at age 35. Of his three children - Pauline, Hans and Trude -- all died tragically. Pauline became a drug addict and died in France. Hans, after becoming Catholic, shot himself on the day of Pauline's funeral. Trude Margarethe died at Theresienstadt at the hands of the Nazis. Herzl's only grandchild, Stephen Theodor (Trude's son), changed his name to Norman and committed suicide by jumping from a bridge into a river in America.

Herzl was buried in Europe, but after the state of Israel was declared, his body was disinterred and brought to Israel. He is buried in Jerusalem in a cemetery now known as Mount Herzl, where various heads of state and military heroes are also buried.

## KEY PERSONALITIES

Of the key personalities at this time, we must mention three:

- Chaim Weizmann (1874 to 1952)
- David Ben-Gurion (1886 to 1973)
- Asher Hersh Ginsberg (1856 to 1927)

Weizmann was a Russian-born chemist, who early on in his youth became associated with the group *Hovevei Zion* ("Lovers of Zion"). After Herzl's death in 1904 he became the de facto leader of the Zionist Movement.

Interestingly, Weizmann invented artificial acetone, the chief ingredient in gunpowder, in 1915 in the middle of World War I. His invention enabled the British to mass-produce gunpowder for the war effort.

**Balfour said that acetone converted him to Zionism.** Because of this, he became friendly with Arthur Balfour, the foreign secretary of England. Balfour, who in 1917 promised British support for a national homeland for Jews in Palestine, said that acetone converted him to Zionism. (We will discuss the Balfour Declaration in the next installment.)

David Ben-Gurion was born David Gruen in Plonsk, Poland. A very significant personality, he was small in stature but a real powerhouse. Although he came from a religious family which was fervently Zionist, early on he abandoned his religious roots.

Ben-Gurion arrived in Israel in 1906 at age 20, working in the orange groves and in the wine cellars of the early settlements. He was active in the *Po'alei Zion* ("Workers of Zion"), but he took some controversial positions in his party -- such as that immigrants and settlers have the right to manage their own affairs

without interference from the Diaspora, that immigrating to Israel was the obligation of every party member, and that Hebrew be the sole language of his party.

In that time, the land of Israel was still under the control of the Ottoman Empire and Ben-Gurion, who studied law in Constantinople for a while, favored loyalty to Turkey and adoption of Ottoman citizenship for Jews. However, when World War I broke out and the Turks began to persecute Zionists, he ran into trouble with the authorities and was exiled. He went to New York where he founded the *Ahdut ha-Avodah* ("United Labor Party").

(The second part of Ben-Gurion's story -- when he returned to Israel to become the head of the Jewish Agency in 1935 and then the first Prime Minister of Israel in 1948 -- will be covered in the next installment.)

The third key personality was Asher Hersh Ginsberg, whose pen name was Ahad HaAm. He was originally one of the *Maskilim* who became disillusioned with their plan to acculturate the Jews to Eastern European society. He became the great intellectual leader of the early Zionist movement. His vision for the Jewish state was not as a refuge for the oppressed Jewry of the world, but rather a place where the modern Jew could create a new secular, progressive, "enlightened" state which would become the center of a new modern Jewish culture.

In 1897, he wrote in *The Jewish State and The Jewish*:

"This Jewish settlement, which will be a gradual growth, will become in course of time the center of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then, from this center the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the over-all unity of our people. When our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men in the Land of itself who will be able, at a favorable moment, to establish a State there -- one which will be not merely a State of Jews but really a Jewish State."

Ginsberg personified the dominant element in the Zionist movement -- enlightened Jews who started out wanting to solve the problem of anti-Semitism by helping Jews to assimilate. Only later, when they found their efforts were futile -- in the face of terrible persecution which did not let up no matter how much the Jews tried to blend in -- did they turn to working for a Jewish homeland.

The key factor which shaped their worldview was a nationalism based not only on the notion of creating a physical Jewish homeland, but also of creating a new kind of Jew to build and maintain this homeland. Many of these early Zionist thinkers felt that centuries of ghettoization and persecution had robbed the Jews of their pride and strength. To build a homeland required a proud, self-sufficient Jew: a Jew who could farm, defend himself, and build the land.

**To build a homeland required a new Jew who could farm, defend himself, and build the land.** The pious, poor, ghettoized Jew -- who presented a pathetic image of a man stooped-over and always at the mercy of his persecutors -- had to be done away with. To build a state required something all-together different -- a "Hebrew." The early Zionists called themselves "Hebrews" and not Jews, and deliberately changed their German or Russian or Yiddish names to sound more Hebraic and nationalistic (for example, David Gruen became David Ben-Gurion).

These early Zionist leaders knew of course that religion had preserved Jewish identity in the ghettos and shtetls of Europe, but in the modern Jewish state, they felt there would be no need for it.

## REACTION TO ZIONISM

This attitude was part of the reason why many rabbinic leaders were opposed to Zionism. They were reacting to the antagonism toward religion by the early secular Zionists and to the idea of a state devoid of religious values.

Rabbi Tzadik Hacoheh Rabinowitz, who was known as the Tzadik of Lublin (1823 to 1900) typified this view:

"We surely know that if we were believers and truly trusted in the salvation of the Lord and were observers of the commandments of God, we would even today be dwelling in our Holy Land. Why did the Land perish? 'Because they abandoned My laws which I put before them.' It has already been made clear that the Zionists reject all the commandments and cleave to every manner of abomination. It may be assumed that if the Zionists gain domination they will seek to remove from the hearts of Israel, belief in God and in the truth of Torah. They have thrown off their garments of assimilation and put on a cloak of zeal so that they appear zealous on the behalf of Judaism. They are in fact digging a mine beneath our faith and seeking to lead Israel from beneath the wings of the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence."

Not all Orthodox Jews shared this attitude. There were many religious Zionists who were some of the fiercest fighters for returning to the land.

As we saw in [Part 62](#), it was Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever, one of the first religious Zionists from Poland, who heavily influenced Baron de Rothschild in supporting early settlements.

**Reform Jews in America and Germany were very much opposed to Zionism.** Another key figure was the Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who saw God's hand in the foundations laid by the secular Zionists and endeavored to work with them. He wrote the famous *Orot* ("Lights") about the holiness of the newborn nationalism. In 1921, he became the chief rabbi of Palestine.

Reform Jews in America and Germany were very much opposed to Zionism.

German Reform Jews said: "The hope for national restoration [to Israel] contradicts our feelings for the fatherland [Germany]." And American Reform Jews said: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine... nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state..." (See [Parts 54](#) and [58](#) for more on this subject.)

## SECOND AND THIRD ALIYAH

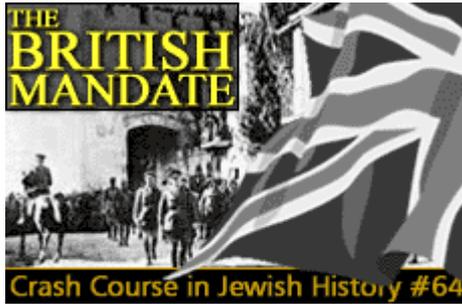
Still, whatever the reaction of the Jewish world at large, Jews kept returning to Israel.

In the last installment we covered the first *aliyah* -- "ascent to the land" -- which brought 30,000 Jews to Israel between 1882 and 1891.

The second *aliyah* -- following the Kishinev Program on Easter 1903 (see [Part 57](#)) and following the first aborted Russian Revolution of 1905 -- brought another 40,000 Jews to Israel between 1904 and 1914.

The third *aliyah* -- following World War I and the Russian Revolution -- brought another 35,000 (between 1919 and 1923).

By this time, the dream of a Jewish homeland was no longer just a dream. It was becoming a reality as the victorious Allied Forces conquered the Ottoman Empire (which had picked the losing side in World War I) and the British took over control of the Middle East.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**The British promised to create a Jewish state. Instead they served their own Arab-linked interests as millions died in the Holocaust.**

World War I changed the map of the world.

World War I, a huge conflict waged over four years (1914-1918) pitted the Allies (chiefly France, Britain, Russia, and the U.S.) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Turkish Ottoman Empire) against each other. The end result of their struggle was very dramatic:

- Russia of the Czars disappeared. In the midst of the war, and in some part because of it, the Russian Revolution succeeded, creating the Communist state known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.
- The domination of Eastern Europe by Germany and the Austria-Hungarian Empire ended. Poland -- which had not existed for more than a hundred years, having been divided between Russia, and Prussia (Germany) and Austro-Hungary -- was re-created anew.
- The entire Middle East, which had been part of the Ottoman Empire, was split into two great swaths. Half was controlled by France (the French Mandate), the other half by England (the British Mandate).

## **BALFOUR DECLARATION**

The French Mandate included the northern part of the Ottoman Empire. The British Mandate included the southern and eastern part of the Ottoman Empire.

It is important to keep in mind that the Ottoman Empire controlled the Middle East from the 16th to the 20th century -- for some 400 years. During this time, the countries of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, etc. did not exist. The residents in these areas were predominately Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire, living in loosely organized tribal communities.

The British Mandate included the landmass on the West Bank of the Jordan River all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as the landmass on the East Bank of the Jordan River, an area known as Trans-Jordan. The British called this whole huge area "Palestine."

**The area on both banks of the Jordan, the British called "Palestine."**

(As we might recall from Part 38, the name Palestine for the land of Israel had been coined by the Romans after their destruction of Jerusalem, which they re-named Aelia Capitolina.)

When the British took over the land of Israel, suddenly the dream of a homeland for the Jews became a real possibility as opposed to a fervent hope.

By this time, there were between 85,000 to 100,000 Jews living in the Land of Israel, of a total population of 600,000. (See *History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson, p. 430.) Most of the Arabs living in the land had migrated there only in the previous thirty years attracted by the jobs created by the Jews who were building and farming. (Note that when Jews began to immigrate to Palestine in large numbers in 1882, fewer than 250,000 Arabs lived there. See *From Time Immemorial* by Joan Peters, p. 244)

A big boost for a Jewish homeland came from Earl Arthur Balfour (1848-1930), then foreign secretary, who in 1917 promised British support for the cause.

As we might recall from Part 63, Balfour became a friend of the Jewish cause in some measure because of Chaim Weizmann whose invention of artificial acetone, the chief ingredient in gunpowder, enabled the British to mass-produce gunpowder for the war effort. Balfour said that acetone converted him to Zionism.

A fascinating conversation is recorded between Balfour and Weizmann in 1906, with Balfour arguing that the Jews should consider the offer made by the British some three years earlier to take Uganda instead of Israel:

In reaction, Weizmann said to Balfour, "Would you take Paris over London?"

Balfour replied, "But we already have London." (He meant, of course, Jews should take whatever they can get; beggars can't be choosers.)

At which point Weizmann came back with, "Mr. Balfour, the Jews had Jerusalem when London was a marsh."

That gave Balfour pause. "Are there many Jews who think like you?" he asked.

"I believe I speak the mind of millions of Jews whom you will never see and who cannot speak for themselves, but with whom I could pave the streets of the country I come from," Weizmann answered.

"If this is so, you will one day be a force," Balfour concluded.

Balfour's support for a Jewish homeland became known in history as the Balfour Declaration which was issued in the form a letter to Lord Rothschild on November 2nd, 1917. It stated:

"His Majesty's government looks with favor upon the establishment in Palestine of a national homeland for the Jewish people."

But talk is cheap, and when it came to the reality of creating such a state, the British had many other considerations and interests to take into consideration, as we shall see presently.

## **FAILED PROMISES**

Despite the support of certain British political figures, the British Foreign Ministry and others were generally much more pro-Arab, and the British government got busy carving out Arab countries from the lands of the Ottoman Empire.

Through their efforts the country of Iraq was created in 1921. It was a monarchy with Faisal ibn Hussein, the son of Hussein the Sherif of Mecca, as king. Soon thereafter Iraqi oil started to flow to the West.

Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world (after Saudi Arabia) and it is no wonder the British were interested in having a bond with this country as well as other oil-rich Arab states.

Another country created by the British was Jordan. In 1927, the British installed Abdullah ibn Hussein, another son of the Sherif of Mecca, as emir of the new country called Trans-Jordan, later Jordan. Jordan was confined to the East Bank of the River Jordan and did not include any part of the West Bank.

Why were the sons of the Sherif of Mecca made rulers of these countries?

### **The sons of the Sherif of Mecca were made rulers of Iraq and Jordan.**

The British wanted alliances with all the Arab kingdoms. They had shored up support for the Ibn Saud of the Arabian Peninsula, who had fought the Turks alongside them. Ibn Saud got Saudi Arabia.

But when that happened, the British had to pay off the Hussein Sherif of Mecca, who was in charge of the Islamic holy sites. (The Hussein family are Hashemites, the tribe of Mohammed, the founder of Islam, and have been traditionally the keepers of Holy City of Mecca.)

They had to give him and his children some land, so they gave them Iraq and Trans-Jordan -- the land on the East Bank of the River Jordan.

## **NO ISRAEL**

Yet despite all this country-making, and despite the Balfour Declaration, the British could not get around to creating a country called Israel.

Why not?

There was a clear British bias against the Jews as is readily apparent to anyone who has studied the series of White Papers issued by the British government in the 1920s and 1930s.

The reasons for this bias were:

- The British had to deal with the issue of an Arab majority living in what was left of Palestine. They came up with all kinds of partition plans all of which were rejected by the Arabs. (Not all Arabs were opposed by-the-way; King Faisal of Iraq signed an agreement with Chaim Weizman calling for peace and cooperation.)

- Many members of the British government and military were clearly anti-Semitic and had a romantic/patronizing attitude toward the Arabs.
- The Arabs had oil and England needed oil. In the final analysis, the British had to take into consideration what was in their best interest. Looking after their strategic interests and placating tens of millions of Arabs was more important in their eyes than saving a few hundred thousand Jews, even though this went against the conditions of the mandate that they were granted in 1920.

Meanwhile the poor Jews, not knowing that the British were going to back out of their promise, kept migrating to the land.

The third migration or *aliyah* (between 1919 and 1923) brought 35,000 Jews to the land. The fourth *aliyah* (between 1924 and 1928) brought 80,000 Jews to the land. The fifth *aliyah* (between 1929 and 1939 as Hitler rose to power in Germany) brought 250,000 Jews to the land.

## ARAB RIOTS

The Arabs made it clear that they were not going to sit still for a Jewish state. In August of 1929, due to the instigation of the preachers in the mosques, a series of riots broke out in which many Jews were massacred.

The New York Times in its history of Israel (*Israel: from Ancient Times to the Modern Nation*, pp. 38-39) writes of this time:

"The riots of August, 1929, were ignited in Jerusalem over a rumor spread by Arab leaders that Jews were going to destroy Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third most holy shrine. Fighting soon spread throughout Palestine. The worst massacres were in Hebron, sacred to Jew and Muslim alike, where 67 Orthodox Jews - men, women and children - were slaughtered by Arabs and 50 more wounded. Pierre van Paassen, a reporter, described the horror that he witnessed by lamplight in a Jewish seminary in Hebron: 'The slain students in the yard, the dead men in the synagogue, slashed throats and mutilated bodies.' By the time order was restored 133 Jews had been killed, 399 wounded."

The 1930s saw more rioting and more massacres, especially in Jaffa and again in Hebron.

In response, the British convened the Peel Commission which almost totally did away with the Balfour Declaration that had originally promised a Jewish homeland in Palestine on both sides of the River Jordan.

In July of 1937, the Peel Commission issued a report which said that all the Jews should be confined to a tiny state that would include a sliver of land along the Mediterranean coast and a small piece in the north abutting the west side of the Lake Kineret ("Sea of Galilee").

**The Arabs  
greeted the Peel  
Commission  
recommendation  
with a revolt  
which lasted until**

**two years.** The Arabs greeted the Peel Commission recommendation with a revolt which lasted until 1939.

The Arab Revolt was led by Haj Amin Hussein, who was originally appointed as the Mufti of Jerusalem by the British. It is interesting to note that in addition to hundreds of Jews who were killed by Arabs, some 3,000 Arabs died in this revolt at the hands of other Arabs and at the hands of the British.

For all the British criticism of Israel today, at that time the British were not shy in their efforts to quell the rioting. They introduced the policy of housing demolition and used artillery to shell rebellious towns.

The revolt was finally crushed and the Mufti fled first to Beirut and later to Europe, where he became an ally of Adolph Hitler, organizing a Bosnian S.S. unit to kill Jews in the Balkans.

After the war he was captured but escaped. He was later involved in fomenting violence, including the assassination of King Abdullah of Jordan in 1951. He was last heard of living as a guest in Saudi Arabia. (Faisal Hussein, who was the PLO's representative in Jerusalem and who recently died of a heart attack was a relative of his.)

## DEATH SENTENCE

The British did not keep the promise contained in the Balfour Declaration and neither did they keep the promise contained in the Peel Commission report.

They did enforce one aspect of the Peel Commission report -- that which limited Jewish migration to the land to only 12,000 a year for the next five years (1939-1943). By doing so the British doomed the Jews under the control of Nazis -- they would no longer be able to find refuge in their homeland.

**The British closed an escape route that would have saved millions of Jewish lives.** They did this, knowing full well what the Germans were doing to the Jews -- this was after the Nuremberg Laws and *Kristallnacht* (see Part 60). And still the British closed an escape route that would have saved millions of Jewish lives. The Jews were desperate and they tried to come illegally. In response, the British set up a blockade to keep them out.

Many Jews managed to circumvent the blockade and it is estimated that 115,000 Jews got through. But 115,000 is a very small number compared to the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust and who could not find refuge in the land of Israel.

## JEWISH RESISTANCE

Meanwhile, the mainstream of the Zionist movement in the Land of Israel coalesced into the Jewish Agency, an organization headed by David Ben Gurion. Officially recognized by the British as representing Jewish aspirations, the Jewish Agency tried not to antagonize the British openly.

The Jewish Agency did have an underground military organization called the Haganah, which tried to protect the Jewish settlements from the Arabs (since the British were doing next to nothing in this regard.)

There were other Zionists, who were not part of the Jewish Agency, who felt that the Jewish Agency was too conciliatory to the British. As they saw it, the British had broken promise after promise to the Jews and had openly sided with the Arabs. Therefore, the Jews had to be much more pro-active.

One of those who had a more aggressive attitude was Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940).

Originally from Odessa, Jabotinsky broke away from the mainstream Zionist movement and in 1925 formed the World Union of Zionist Revisionists. This organization from 1936 on urged the evacuation of Eastern European Jews to Palestine. Had their pleas been heeded by the British, many Jews could have been saved from the Holocaust.

At this time Jabotinsky also became the head of the Jewish underground movement called Irgun Tzevai Leumi -- simply known as the Irgun -- founded in 1937.

In 1941, Menachem Begin (1913-1992), who would later become Prime Minister of Israel, arrived from Russia and assumed the leadership of the Irgun, which took a radical approach towards confronting the British and attacking the Arabs, who were responsible for the death of Jews.

**As Jews lost their patience, more radical groups engaged in violent resistance against the British.** Another, even more radical group, was the Lochamei Cherut Yisrael -- better known as Lechi and called by the British the "Stern Gang" after its founder Avraham Stern (1907-1942). The future Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzchak Shamir, was one of the key leaders of Lechi. As Jewish patience with the British withered after the devastation of the Holocaust, these more radical groups engaged in violent resistance against the British.

For example, the Irgun blew up one wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 which at the time was the headquarters of the British authorities in Palestine. Their prior warning was apparently received and ignored. Menachem Begin quotes one British official who supposedly refused to evacuate the building, saying: "We don't take orders from the Jews." As a result, the casualty toll was high: 91 killed and 45 injured. Among the casualties were 15 Jews.

They also hanged two British army officers in retribution for the hanging of Irgun members, and staged a daring break-out of the Acco (Acre) prison where the British held many Jews active in the resistance.

A senior British officer summed up the effects of the Jewish resistance groups:

"The British Army suffered greater losses in traffic accidents than in all the [Jewish] underground operations put together. But the blows to the Empire's pride and prestige were something which could not be digested. The break-in at the Acre Prison and hanging of the two sergeants were blows to our pride. The break-in at the prison gained the symbolic significance of the fall of the Bastille." (*To the Promised Land* by Uri Dan, p. 120)

But the British still did not give in.



**After the British brutally turned away Holocaust survivors from Israel, the UN voted to partition the land.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

The British broke promise after promise to the Jews while they created new Arab countries out of the land of the former Ottoman Empire. In addition, because of Arab revolts and pressure, the British even barred entry to the land of Israel to Jews fleeing the Holocaust. (See Part 64.)

Even when the full scope of the Holocaust was known, and thousands of Holocaust survivors were stranded in refugee camps (DP camps), the British refused to relent.

**One of the most egregious of the British actions involved the refugee ship, *Exodus*.**

One of the most egregious of the British actions involved the refugee ship, *Exodus*, which the Royal Navy intercepted in 1947 in the Mediterranean Sea with 4,500 Jews aboard. The ship was brought into Haifa port under British escort; there the Holocaust survivors were forcibly transferred to another ship and returned back to Germany via France.

Abba Eban, who was then the Jewish liason to a special UN committee -- called Special Commmitte On Palestine or UNSCOP -- persuaded four UN representatives to go to Haifa to witness the brutality of the British against the Jews.

Historian Martin Gilbert includes Eban's account of what happened there in *Israel: A History* (p. 145):

"[In Haifa] the four members watched a 'gruesome operation.' The Jewish refugees had decided 'not to accept banishment with docility. If anyone had wanted to know what Churchill meant by a "squalid war," he would have found out by watching British soldier using rifle butts, hose pipes and tear gas against the survivors of the death camps. Men, women and children were forcibly taken off to prison ships, locked in cages below decks and set out of Palestine waters.'

"When the four members of UNSCOP came back to Jerusalem, Eban recalled, 'they were pale with shock. I could see that they were pre-occupied with one point alone: if this was the only way that the British Mandate could continue, it would be better not to continue it at all.'"

## **UN PARTITION OF PALESTINE**

The British also wanted out of the problem. They had 100,000 soldiers/police trying to maintain control with a total population of about 600,000 Jews and 1.2 million Arabs. (Interestingly, they had the same size force controlling India with a population of over 350 million!)

And so it came to pass that the British turned the matter over to the UN which decided to end the British Mandate over what was left of "Palestine" (after the creation of the country of Jordan) and to divide the remaining land among the Arabs and Jews. The proposal called for the Jews to get:

- a narrow strip of land along the Mediterranean coast, including Tel Aviv and Haifa
- a piece of land surrounding the Kineret (Sea of Galilee), including the Golan Heights
- a large piece in the south, which was the uninhabitable Negev Desert

The Arabs were to get:

- the Gaza Strip
- a chunk of the north, including the city of Tzfat (Safed) and western Galilee
- the entire West Bank of the River Jordan and the hills of Judea and Samaria

Jerusalem was to be under international control.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations voted for this partition plan. Of those voting, 33 nations voted yes, including USA and USSR; 13 mostly-Arab nations voted no; 11 nations abstained.

Hard-hearted to the end, the British did not vote yes; they abstained.

As disappointed as the Jews were with the portion allotted for the Jewish state, they felt that something was better than nothing after all the waiting and the pain.

However, the Arabs, always maximalist in their demands, rejected the UN resolution. The next day Arab rioting began, and two weeks later soldiers from surrounding Arab countries began arriving into Palestine.

The British, happy to be out of the situation, were packing up to go and turned their backs on what was going on. Writes David Ben Gurion in his *Israel: A Personal History* (p. 65):

"The British did not lift a finger to stop this military invasion. They also refused to cooperate with the UN committee charged with supervising implementation of the General Assembly resolution. At the same time, the Arabs living in the district destined to become part of the Jewish state began evacuating their homes and moving to the Arab states neighboring Palestine at the orders of the Arab High Committee."

In the midst of confusion, the rioting continued with almost 1,000 Jews murdered by Arabs in the ensuing four months.

One of the worst incidents occurred on April 13, 1948. A convoy of 70 doctors and nurses making their way to Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus was ambushed by Arabs. This happened 200 yards of a British police station. After a seven-hour shoot-out, during which the British did nothing, all the doctors and nurses were killed. Afterwards, the Arabs mutilated their bodies.

## **JERUSALEM UNDER SIEGE**

In all of this, the British encouraged the King of Jordan, Abdullah, to invade and annex the Arab sections to his kingdom. To Abdullah this was not enough. He wanted Jerusalem too.

As a result Jerusalem came under siege.

The focus of the struggle during April and May 1948 was the road to Jerusalem which passes through the mountains. The vehicles on that road are completely exposed to gunmen up above. It was on this road that all supplies to the Jews of the city had to come. But they could not get through.

**The focus of the struggle during April and May 1948 was the road to Jerusalem.**

Hunger reigned. The residents of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City were completely cut off.

And then an amazing incident happened. A young Yemenite Jew, who was not known for his shooting skills, almost accidentally killed three Arab men in the hills. One of these men was the Arab leader, Abdul Khader el Husseini. Demoralized, the Arab forces abandoned their positions to attend his funeral.

As a result a huge convoy of 250 trucks of food was able to re-supply the city. Writes Berel Wein in *Triumph of Survival* (p. 397):

"[On Shabbat, April 17, 1948] Jews left their synagogues and, with their prayer shawls still draping their shoulders, helped unload the convoy. The siege of Jerusalem was broken for the moment. The Arabs, however, mounted a strong counter-attack, and by the end of April once again cut the Jerusalem road... for the next seven weeks Jewish Jerusalem was isolated."

## **A NEW STATE IS BORN**

The official date given by the United Nations in their partition vote for the creation of the two new entities was May 15th, 1948.

Thus, May 14th was to be the last day of the British Mandate. At 4 p.m., the British lowered their flag and immediately the Jews raised their own.

It was a flag designed in 1897 by the First Zionist Congress. It was white (the color of newness and purity), and it had two blue stripes (the color of heaven) like the stripes of a *tallit*, the prayer shawl, which symbolized the transmission of Jewish tradition. In its center was the Star of David.

Thus on May 14, 1948 at 4:00 p.m., *Hay Iyar*, the 5th of Iyar, Israel declared itself a state.

After 2,000 years, the land of Israel was once more in the hands of the Jews.

David Ben Gurion read the Declaration of Independence over the radio:

"The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here the spiritual, religious and national identity was formed. Here they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world..."

"Exiled from Palestine, the Jewish people remained faithful to it in all the countries of the dispersion, never ceasing to pray and hope for their return and restoration of their national freedom."

"Accordingly we, the members of the National Council met together in solemn assembly today and by virtue of the natural and historic right of the Jewish people and with the support of the resolution of the General of the United Nations, hereby proclaim the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine to be called Israel..."

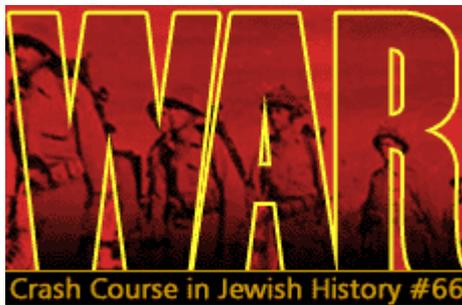
"We offer peace and amity to all neighboring states and their peoples and invite them to cooperate with the independent Jewish nation for the common good of all..."

"With trust in the Rock of Israel, we set our hands to this declaration at this session of the Provisional State Council in the city of Tel Aviv on Sabbath Eve, 5th Iyar 5708, 14th day of May 1948."

(Note that the Declaration of Independence of Israel -- unlike the American Declaration of Independence -- does not mention God. This is because the hard-line secularists that dominated the Jewish Agency opposed any such thing. "Rock of Israel" became a compromise.)

Everyone was dancing in the streets. But not for long.

Almost immediately five Arab countries declared war and Egypt bombed Tel Aviv.



**Since its founding in 1948, Israel has been in a constant state of war and yet it has achieved great economic success.**

[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

On Erev Shabbat, 5th Iyar 5708, 14th day of May 1948, Israel became a state.

And immediately it was plunged into war as five of the neighboring Arab states attacked. These Arab states had previously voted against the UN partition of Palestine and now simply refused to recognize that historic and democratic vote. (See Part 65 for more on this subject.)

Little Israel, which had virtually no heavy artillery, no tanks, no airplanes, had to defend itself against Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq! That's 600,000 Jews against 45 million Arabs, while the United Nations did nothing.

And yet the Jews won. It was nothing short of a miracle.

But the victory was bittersweet. The Old City of Jerusalem -- including the Jewish Quarter and access to the Kotel, the Western (Wailing) Wall -- fell to the Jordanians. The Jews were driven out of the Old City, and their homes and synagogues looted and destroyed.

Jordanians barred Jewish access to any holy sites within the Old City, and the world again did not lift a finger to protest that the religious rights of a people were being violated.

(For fascinating details about the War of Independence, see *The Pledge* by Leonard Slater.)

## **NEW BORDERS**

The War of Independence had lasted 13 months. Some 6,000 Israelis died or a full 1% of the Jewish population at that time.

(If that had happened in America, proportionally, 2.5 million people would have died. As upset as America was about the Vietnam War, it lost 52,000 soldiers in that war.)

**The War of Independence was Israel's costliest war.** Mt. Herzl, the national cemetery, is full of graves without names. These are graves of Holocaust survivors who made it to Israel only to be handed a gun in order to fight for the survival of the Jewish nation. No one had time to get to know their names. They went down in history only as Yossi or Hershel or Moshe. It is a tragic thing to see all these graves marked "Plony" (which is the Israeli version of "John Doe.")

The War of Independence was Israel's costliest war.

The end of the war defined the borders of the new State of Israel in a radically new way. The borders were not the ones that the UN defined in their partition vote. In sum total, Israel got more land, though it lost the Old City of Jerusalem.

| ISRAEL         | As per UN vote:   | After the 1948 war:  |
|----------------|---|--|
|                | Narrow strip of land along Mediterranean (Tel Aviv and Haifa)   | Narrow strip of land along Mediterranean (Tel Aviv and Haifa)                            |
| JEWISH CONTROL | Land surrounding the Sea of Galilee<br>Negev Desert   | Land surrounding the Sea of Galilee<br>Negev Desert<br>North and Western Galilee (Tzfat) |
| ARAB CONTROL   | Entire West Bank of the River Jordan (Judea and Samaria)<br>Gaza Strip<br>North and Western Galilee (Tzfat) | Entire West Bank of the River Jordan (Judea and Samaria)<br>Gaza Strip                   |
| Jerusalem      | Under international control   | In Jordanian hands   |

## POPULATION

Already, at the time of the UN partition vote, Arab residents of Palestine began fleeing in anticipation of war. The first to go were the 30,000 of the wealthiest. By January 1948 the Palestine Arab Higher Committee asked other Arab countries to bar entry of refugees because the Arab exodus from Palestine was so alarming.

At the time of the declaration of the State of Israel, 472,000 Arabs fled as war broke out.

At the same time, 820,000 Jews were forced to flee Arab lands such as Syria, Iraq, Iran etc. Most of the property of these Jews, many of whom were wealthy people, was confiscated, never to be returned. (Of these Jews, 526,000 settled in Israel.)

Once the war was over, the population began to rise by leaps and bounds with Jewish immigrants coming not only from Arab countries, but also from other states and more recently from Ethiopia and Russia.

- 1948: 600,000 Jews
- 1956: 1.2 million Jews
- 1973: 1.8 million Jews
- 1999: 4.7 million Jews

The population of Israel, since the founding of the state, has increased many-fold. This increase had presented a special challenge, because of the huge economic burden of absorbing such a huge number of newcomers.

However, while it was a burden, the population growth has also been a big blessing. Immigration has done tremendous things for the country. The standard of living in Israel -- which in 1948 was forced to ration food -- has gone up tremendously in the last two decades.

Was this a miracle? Clearly. But it was also a fulfillment of prophecy.

*And the Lord, your God, shall return you from your captivity, and have compassion upon you. He shall return and gather you from amongst all the nations. And the Lord, your God will bring you back into the land your fathers inherited. He will make you even more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. (Deut. 30:3-5)*

*For thus says God, "Shout with joy for Jacob, exult at the head of the nations; proclaim your praise and say: 'O God, deliver your people, the remnant of Israel!' Behold, I will bring them back from northern lands, and gather them from the ends of the world ..." (Jeremiah 31:6-7)*

But Israel has not only been able to absorb huge masses of people, it has not only survived living in a constant state of war, it has grown economically. And this despite various trade boycotts instigated by Arab nations. (For example, Pepsi Cola didn't sell in Israel for years because of the boycott. For many years, Subaru was the only Japanese car manufacturer to sell here.) Keeping this in mind, it is absolutely miraculous what Israel has been able to do.

Not only did the "desert bloom," but in a relatively short time the once barren land was producing a surplus! This surplus was then exported to other, far more "lush" countries, like the U.S.

Another fulfillment of prophecy:

*"As for you, O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and bear your fruit for My people Israel, for their return is close at hand. For behold, I am with you and I shall turn to you; then you shall be tilled and sown. And I will multiply men upon you, the entire family of Israel." (Ezekiel 36:8-11)*

In 1997 the International Monetary Fund took Israel off the list of developing countries, because it is now fully developed. It has the 19th highest standard of living in the world, just behind that of England.

## SIX DAY WAR

The Arab countries did not easily accept their defeat in 1948. All the while they were plotting a comeback.

On May 22, 1967, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) declared the Strait of Tiran -- that is Israel's sea access to Eilat -- was closed to all Israeli ships and any other ships bound for Israel. This attempt at economic strangulation would have been an act of war to any other country, but initially Israel did not react, attempting to find a political solution.

Meanwhile, Nasser became more and more aggressive in his verbal attacks on Israel. On May 27, 1967, he declared: "Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel. On June 1, 1967, Iraq's president Abdel Rahman Aref declared: "Our goal is clear -- to wipe Israel off the map."

**It was clear that war was imminent.** Egypt and Syria already had a pact combining their armies and now Egypt made a similar agreement with Jordan. It was clear that war was imminent. On June 5th, 1967, Israel, realizing that the entire Arab world is about to attack, launched a preemptive strike.

It was one of the most brilliant preemptive strikes in history. In one fell swoop, Israeli planes bombed the entire Egyptian Air Force still sitting on the ground, and a day later did the same thing to the entire Jordanian Air Force.

Why didn't the Jordanians react after the Egyptians were bombed? Because the Egyptians were broadcasting that they had achieved a tremendous victory (when they were completely crushed). Not knowing what was truly happening, the Jordanians believed the propaganda and thus were unprepared.

In just six days, Israel captured huge chunks of territory and won what is generally considered to be one of the greatest military victories in history:

- In the south, the Sinai Peninsula (from Egypt)
- In the north, the Golan Heights (from Syria); note that Syria, initially part of the lands of the French Mandate after World War I, became part of the United Arab Republic (together with Egypt and Yemen) in 1958; in 1961 Syria withdrew from the union, creating its own borders which included the Golan Heights
- In the east, the West Bank of the River Jordan, which Jordan annexed after 1948, though this land was never meant to be part of the country of Jordan
- And most importantly, Israel re-captured the Old City of Jerusalem, which should have been "international" under the UN plan, but which Jordan unilaterally took over in 1948 barring all Jews

## REUNITED JERUSALEM

For 19 years, Jews had not been able to enter the Old City or pray at their most holy of sites, the Temple Mount or the Kotel (the Western Wall) of the Temple Mount.

Many of the soldiers fighting the war had not been born yet when this site was lost to the Jewish people. They had only seen it in photographs.[HTTP://WWW.SERVANTOFMESSIAH.ORG](http://www.servantofmessiah.org)

Entering the Old City, they did not know where to go, and when they found it, they openly wept.

On the radio, the paratrooper, who was leading the Old City forces, announced: "*Har HaBayit b'yadenu -- The Temple Mount is in our hands.*"

People were jubilant. They couldn't believe the miracle that had happened.

It must be stressed that the Jewish behavior in victory was in stark contrast to the Arab behavior after their victory over the Old City in 1948, when five dozen synagogues were looted and destroyed. Jewish soldiers did not dynamite the Dome of the Rock or any other mosque in the Old City and access to these sites for Arab has continued uninterrupted.

## **PLO**

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in January 1964 by Ahmed Shukeiry as a representative organization of the Arab refugees of the 1948 war. It was never a peaceful organization, however. In fact, Shukeiry once predicted an Arab victory over Israel, saying: "Those [Jews] who survive will remain in Palestine. I estimate that none of them will survive."

The first and consistent aim of the PLO was the elimination of the State of Israel and its replacement by the State of Palestine.

(It is important to note that a State of Palestine had never existed in history. The Arab people living in this land during the days of the Ottoman Empire were simply Arabs with no national identity. After the Ottoman Empire collapsed, in the days of the British Mandate, both Jews and Arabs were considered "Palestinians" by the British.)

Egyptian-born Yassir Arafat (1929-) was the head of Fatah, the PLO's terrorist group, and after the Six Day War, he took over the entire organization.

**Egyptian-born Yassir Arafat was the head of Fatah, the PLO's terrorist group.** One of the most infamous acts carried out under Arafat's direction in the early days was the kidnapping and murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

It is important to remember that the world again stood silent. The Olympic Games went on, while the terrorists were holding the Jewish athletes. The Israelis wanted to intervene but the Germans refused their help. In the end, the Germans totally botched the rescue attempt which led to the deaths of all the athlete hostages. Israel later hunted down and killed many of the terrorists responsible for Munich.

The PLO has since carried out literally countless numbers of terrorist attacks against Israelis. To list them all would take a book in itself.

Indeed, it is beyond the scope of this Crash Course in Jewish History to attempt to outline the turbulent history of the State of Israel in the last 30 years which includes at least two major wars -- 1973, the Yom Kippur War, and 1982, the Lebanon War -- as well as the attacks by Iraq in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

As for this writing, the Palestinian Authority, headed by Yassir Arafat, is conducting a terrorist war which began in September 2000. It is clear that Arafat and many other Arab states have still not abandoned their dream of destroying Israel.



[by Rabbi Ken Spiro](#)

**In the final analysis,  
Jewish history makes no  
rational sense.**

On January 16, 1996, then President of Israel, Ezer Weizmann, gave a speech to both Houses of Parliament of Germany. He gave this speech in Hebrew to the Germans, fifty years after the Holocaust, and in it he beautifully summed up what Jewish history is. He said:

"It was fate that delivered me and my contemporaries into this great era when the Jews returned to re-establish their homeland ...

"I am no longer a wandering Jew who migrates from country to country, from exile to exile. But all Jews in every generation must regard themselves as if they had been there in previous generations, places and events. Therefore, I am still a wandering Jew but not along the far flung paths of the world. Now I migrate through the expanses of time from generation to generation down the paths of memory ...

"I was a slave in Egypt. I received the Torah on Mount Sinai. Together with Joshua and Elijah I crossed the Jordan River. I entered Jerusalem with David and was exiled with Zedekiah. And I did not forget it by the rivers of Babylon. When the Lord returned the captives of Zion I dreamed among the builders of its ramparts. I fought the Romans and was banished from Spain. I was bound to the stake in Mainz. I studied Torah in Yemen and lost my family in Kishinev. I was incinerated in Treblinka, rebelled in Warsaw, and emigrated to the Land of Israel, the country from where I have been exiled and where I have been born and from which I come and to which I return.

"I am a wandering Jew who follows in the footsteps of my forebearers. And just as I escort them there and now and then, so do my forebearers accompany me and stand with me here today.

"I am a wandering Jew with the cloak of memory around my shoulders and the staff of hope in my hand. I stand at the great crossroads in time, at the end of the twentieth century. I know whence I come and with hope and apprehension I attempt to find out where I am heading.

"We are all people of memory and prayer. We are people of words and hope. We have neither established empires nor built castles and palaces. We have only placed words on top of each other. We have fashioned ideas. We have built memorials. We have dreamed towers of yearning, of Jerusalem rebuilt, of Jerusalem united, of a peace that will swiftly and speedily establish us in our days. Amen."

When we look back at the history of the Jewish people which we have just examined at lightning speed in this series, we have to keep one key thing in mind:

The very survival of the Jewish people through recorded time is nothing short of miraculous. The very fact that Jews exist as a nation today stands in testimony to the existence of God who acts in history. By any historical measure, the Jewish people should have disappeared long ago.

The person who summed this up best was David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel. He said: "A Jew who does not believe in miracles is not a realist."  
**"A Jew who does not believe in miracles is not a realist."** Why did he say that? Because miracles are the only possible explanation for the existence of the Jewish people.

Over 300 years ago King Louis XIV of France asked Blaise Pascal, the great French philosopher, to give him proof of the supernatural. Pascal answered: "Why, the Jews, your Majesty -- the Jews."

An astonishing answer. The best proof of the supernatural that Pascal could think of was: "The Jews."

We don't have to speculate what Pascal meant when he gave this answer, because he took the trouble to spell it out. (See *Pensees*, para. 620, p. 285.) Pascal said that the fact that the Jewish people survived until the 17th century -- to the time period when he was living -- was nothing short of a supernatural phenomenon.

There simply was no logical explanation for it.

As we have seen from this series, Jewish history simply doesn't comply with the rest of history; it does not make sense.

Many scholars and historians have noticed this and remarked about it.

Mark Twain (aka Samuel Clemens), the great American writer, who was an agnostic and a self-acknowledged skeptic, penned this in 1899 in *Harper's Magazine*:

"The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away. The Greek and Roman followed, made a vast noise and they are gone. Other peoples have sprung up, and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal, but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

Leo Nikolaivitch Tolstoy, unlike Twain, was not an agnostic. He was a very religious, Russian Orthodox Christian. He is also a very famous Russian author from the last century, perhaps best known for his *War and Peace*. He wrote this in 1908:

"The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He who neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he who neither fire, nor sword, nor Inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth. He who

was the first to produce the Oracles of God. He who has been for so long the Guardian of Prophecy and has transmitted it to the rest of the world. Such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as Eternity itself.

## KEEPING THE FAITH

There is another reason why the Jewish people survived as a nation through all this time and through all the persecutions that we have barely touched on in this series -- they have clung to their religion.

"More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews."

The great lesson of Jewish history is that the more the Jews have been connected to Judaism -- in lifestyle, in education, etc. -- the more likely that their children and grandchildren would have remained Jewish instead of assimilating into oblivion.

Today there are approximately 12-14 million Jews in the world, where there should be 500 million. The reasons why: 1) persecution, and 2) assimilation.

The greatest strength of the Jewish people is also their greatest weakness.

**The greatest strength of the Jewish people is also their greatest weakness.**

Jews are a "stiff-necked" people. They have stubbornly clung to their beliefs and as a result outlasted all of the ancient empires of history while changing the way the entire world looks at morality and the concept of God. Jewish ideas -- of one God, of a loving God, of a universal vision for humanity -- have been at odds with the philosophies of all these empires, and to hold up that vision has required an unbelievable strength of character.

And yet, what is the greatest weakness of the Jewish people? Their stubborn individuality makes them unbendable. Every Jew thinks he/she is right. The hardest job on earth must be to unify and lead the Jewish people.

Of course, when unified, the Jewish people are an unbeatable force in human history.

## THE MISSION

Jewish history is like a 6,000-piece puzzle. At the beginning you dump the pieces on the table and it makes no sense. But as we assemble piece after piece, a picture emerges. A picture that records the action of God in history. And there's no chance or randomness here. Everything happens for a reason.

By Jewish reckoning we have assembled 5762 of these pieces and have 238 to go. History is moving toward a conclusion, its final destination.

That final destination was described by Prophet Isaiah in these words:

*"In the days to come, The Mount of the Lord's House shall stand Firm above the mountains; And it shall tower above the hills. And all the nations shall gaze on it with joy, And the many peoples shall go and shall say:*

*"Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, To the House of the God of Jacob; That He may instruct us in His ways, And that we may walk in His paths.' For instruction shall come forth from Zion, The word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the many people. And arbitrate for the multitude of nations. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not take up Sword against nation; They shall never again know war."*

(Isaiah 2:2-4; see also Micah 4:1-4)