

PERSECUTION, POLEMIC,
AND DIALOGUE

Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations

JUDAISM AND JEWISH LIFE

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Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations

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For Pearl

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INTRODUCTION

Like Jewish identity itself, which is rooted in a complex, tangled skein of religion and peoplehood, Jewish-Christian relations as a field of inquiry resists easy definition. On the one hand, its focus is narrower than the totality of the Jewish experience in Christian lands; on the other, its reach extends beyond the examination of quintessentially religious interactions. The studies in this volume, while remaining well within the parameters of any reasonable definition of the field, range from religious polemic to images of the Other to the waxing and waning of anti-Semitism, often seen through the prism of ever-changing historiographical perceptions.

My interest in this subject emerged out of a religious matrix. As I noted in the review essay of Robert Chazan's *Barcelona and Beyond* reprinted in this collection, I was especially fascinated by Nahmanides' account of his 1263 disputation when I read it as a high school student drawn to a text defending Judaism against a Christian critique. As a senior in Yeshiva College, I attended a class in medieval history taught by Norman Cantor, who supplemented his work at Columbia University with a course at Yeshiva. Since I had majored in classical languages, I chose a paper topic that would enable me to use Latin—and, I suppose, to show off my ability to do so. Because of a stray line in Cantor's *Medieval History* to which I made a brief allusion in that paper, I decided to write about the attitude of St. Peter Damian (with whom I was of course entirely unfamiliar before that year) toward the Jews. The paper questioned the validity of Cantor's remark, and his single comment was both gratifying and sobering: "A+. Merits publication. Still, I think you miss the point." To a significant degree, this undergraduate study,

which revealed a key source of Damian's polemic against the Jews and was published a year later in the journal of an Orthodox Jewish student organization, served as the underpinning of my subsequent work in this field. The readers of this collection will have more than enough data to determine whether or not I continue to miss the point.

Since Cantor served on the admissions and fellowship committee of Columbia University's graduate History Department, to which I was admitted during that academic year, the course that I took with him no doubt had another, even more crucial effect on my subsequent career. As a graduate student at Columbia working with the guidance of Gerson Cohen, I wrote a Master's thesis on Nahmanides that had nothing to do with his disputation. But in a course with the semi-retired Salo Baron, I wrote a paper on St. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Jews modeled in part on the article about Damian; years later, it became my first scholarly publication after the completion of my doctorate. As I faced the daunting task of choosing a doctoral dissertation topic, a college classmate named Sidney Hook gave me a soft cover volume recently published for teaching purposes at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It consisted of a photo-offset of a medieval polemic against Christianity entitled *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, or *Nizzahon Vetus*, taken from Johann Christoph Wagenseil's 1681 collection *Tela Ignea Satanae*. The *Nizzahon Vetus*, with its intriguing amalgam of Scriptural polemic, attacks on the New Testament and Christian doctrine, critique of Christian morality, and uninhibited (or almost uninhibited) vituperation, captured my attention and imagination. The edition, translation and commentary that emerged not only led to a PhD but launched me on a lifelong study of Jewish-Christian interaction along the widest thematic and chronological spectrum.

As I indicated in an essay providing personal reflections on the value of academic Jewish Studies,¹ scholarly inquiry into medieval relations between Christians and Jews grew into engagement with contemporary issues of remarkable weight and controversy. One of

¹ "Identity, Ideology, and Faith: Some Personal Reflections on the Social, Cultural and Spiritual Value of the Academic Study of Judaism." In *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. by Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva, 2006), pp. 11–29. That essay, scheduled to reappear in a companion volume published by Academic Studies Press, provides an account of the trajectory of my scholarly interests that supplements and elaborates the brief remarks in this Preface.

these issues, despite a novel formulation and setting, was a reprise of the polemics of old. Pursuant to a request from a Jewish organization, Michael Wyschogrod and I wrote a booklet responding to the arguments of “Jews for Jesus” and similar missionary organizations.² The tone and approach of this work are more respectful, sensitive, and polite than the typical tracts of the past, but there is no avoiding the fact that many of the issues would have been familiar to participants in medieval disputations. Nonetheless, as the title of the present volume implies, a dramatic and welcome transformation has moved the center of gravity of Jewish-Christian interaction from persecution and polemic to often friendly dialogue, although the burdens of the past and the challenges of the present render the new relationship complex, challenging, and strewn with minefields. Some of my forays into this arena appear in the latter section of this book, but I have also been compelled to engage significant challenges that have not made their way into print.

To take just the most recent example, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement in July 2009 objecting to a remark in a 2002 Catholic document entitled *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*. *Reflections*, in a passage that its authors surely regarded as entirely uncontroversial, had affirmed that “Catholics participating in inter-religious dialogue, a mutually enriching sharing of gifts devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism, are nonetheless witnessing to their own faith in the kingdom of God embodied in Christ. This is a form of evangelization, a way of encouraging the Church’s mission.” The 2009 statement found fault with this position: “*Reflections on Covenant and Mission* proposes inter-religious dialogue as a form of evangelization that is ‘devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism.’ Though Christian participation in inter-religious dialogue would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism and entrance into the Church, the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ to which all are implicitly invited.”

Jews involved in dialogue with Christians were taken aback, even stunned, by what appeared to be a redefinition of the objective of

² *Jews and “Jewish Christianity”* (New York, 1978). Russian translation by Mikhail Ryzhik (New York, 1991). Reprinted as *Jews and “Jewish Christianity”: A Jewish Response to the Missionary Challenge* (Jews for Judaism: Toronto, 2002).

interfaith dialogue so that it now affirmed a Catholic intention to issue an implicit invitation that their Jewish partners embrace Christianity. As a member of a delegation of the Rabbinical Council of America and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America that holds regular discussions with representatives of the USCCB, I formulated a friendly, respectful, but vigorous letter asserting that we could not continue business as usual as long as these two sentences remained.³ Shortly thereafter, I was the primary author of a briefer letter sent to the USCCB by five Jewish organizations making a similar point.⁴ It is an understatement to say that I was pleasantly surprised when the bishops, after weeks of deliberation and several unpublicized interchanges, removed the problematic sentences from the official document. This affair illustrates the continuing tensions in even the most amicable sphere of Jewish-Christian relations, but it also demonstrates an unprecedented level of sensitivity to Jewish concerns.

On a lighter note, Sister Mary Boys, who is both an academic and an ecumenical leader, told a memorable story many years ago in her response to a talk that I was invited to deliver at Boston College on the history of Jewish-Christian relations. She was present, she reported, at an ecumenical Passover Seder (perhaps a few days before the holiday itself). It is worth remembering that several hundred years ago participation in a Seder would have subjected a Christian to a charge of Judaizing and in the case of a *converso* could have been grounds for burning at the stake. When the time came for the first of the four required cups of wine, several Catholic participants asked Sister Boys a question. The Seder was being held during Lent, and the questioners had taken it upon themselves to abstain from alcoholic beverages during that season. Must they consequently refrain from drinking the wine? She thought for a moment and responded, “Tell me. St. Patrick’s Day also falls during Lent. Do you drink on St. Patrick’s Day?” The answer was affirmative. If so, ruled Sister Boys, the Passover Seder may be granted the same status as St. Patrick’s Day. After her presentation, I told her that it was worth coming to Boston to hear this story, although I would have ruined it by suggesting that they drink grape juice. Amusing as this wonderful

³ The letter is available on the websites of both organizations. See <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105461> and http://www.ou.org/public_affairs/article/orthodox_response_to_catholic_bishops_statement_on_mission_dialogue/.

⁴ This letter is available at http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/usccb_letter.asp.

story is, it provides a striking, very serious illustration of the dawning of an age that—for all its abiding conflicts and sometimes profound difficulties—would seem as strange to medieval Jews and Christians as Alice’s Wonderland.

Though this collection includes the lion’s share of what I have written about this topic, I have not incorporated everything. Relatively short book reviews, even if they make substantive points beyond the assessment of the book itself, have been omitted.⁵ So has an article that, while not written as a review, is focused on a specific mistranslation and its implications for the interpretation of a key historical document.⁶ Articles in newspapers and a non-academic journal commenting on Catholic-Jewish relations, the legacy of John Paul II regarding Jews, and the controversy over the text of the Tridentine mass have also been excluded.⁷

Then there are three substantial articles that I have left out after some inner struggle. The first is an overview of the history of the Jewish-Christian debate omitted because it seemed inappropriate to include an encyclopedia article and because much, though by no means all, of its content is represented elsewhere in the book.⁸ The other two are directed largely to an Orthodox audience, although they decidedly have wider implications. One of these is a review essay of a work by one of the most important ecumenical thinkers in the Jewish community, where I express both considerable admiration and profound disagreement.⁹ Finally, at a meeting of The Orthodox Forum, which takes place annually

⁵ These include reviews of Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages*, *Association for Jewish Studies Newsletter* 22 (March, 1978): 16–17, 19; Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 93; Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1986): 253–257; Gavin Langmuir, *History, Religion and Antisemitism*, *American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 1498–99; B. Netanyahu, *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain*, *Commentary* 100:4 (October, 1995): 55–57.

⁶ “Cum Nimis Absurdum and the Conversion of the Jews,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 70 (1979): 41–49.

⁷ “The Holocaust, the State of Israel, and the Catholic Church: Reflections on Jewish–Catholic Relations at the Outset of the Twenty-First Century” (in Hebrew), *Hadoar* 82:2 (January, 2003): 51–55; “A Remarkable Legacy,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 11, 2005; “Let’s Clarify the Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue,” *Jerusalem Post*, Feb. 16, 2008.

⁸ “Jewish-Christian Polemics,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 11: 389–395.

⁹ “Covenants, Messiahs, and Religious Boundaries,” a review essay of Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, *Tradition* 39:2 (2005): 66–78.

under the auspices of Yeshiva University, I wrestled with texts about non-Jews in classical Jewish sources that pose ethical problems for the sensibilities of many contemporary believers. The article that emerged from that effort is simultaneously scholarly, religious, and deeply personal. Readers are invited to peruse it, but I did not think that it belonged in this volume.¹⁰

I am grateful to Simcha Fishbane for inviting me to publish this collection of essays and to Meira Mintz, whose preparation of the index served as a salutary reminder of the thoughtfulness and creativity demanded by a task that casual observers often misperceive as routine and mechanical. Menachem Butler was good enough to produce PDF files of the original articles that served as the basis for the production of the volume. I can only hope that the final product is not entirely unworthy of their efforts as well as those of the efficient, helpful leadership and staff of Academic Studies Press among whom I must single out Kira Nemirovsky for her diligent and meticulous care in overseeing the production of the final version.

I am also grateful to the original publishers of these essays for granting permission to reprint them in this volume.

Finally, when publishing a book that represents work done over the course of a lifetime, an author's expression of gratitude to wife and family embraces far more than the period needed to write a single volume. Without Pearl, whose human qualities and intellectual and practical talents beggar description, whatever I might have achieved would have been set in a life largely bereft of meaning. And then there are Miriam and Elie—and Shai, Aryeh and Sarah; Yitzhak and Ditzza—and Racheli, Sara, Tehilla, Baruch Meir, Breindy, Tova, and Batsheva; Gedalyah and Miriam—and Shoshana, Racheli, Sheindl, and Baruch Meir. Each of these names evokes emotions for which I am immeasurably grateful and which I cannot even begin to express.

¹⁰ "Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts." In *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age*, ed. by Marc Stern (Lanham, 2005), pp. 83–108.

SPANNING
THE
CENTURIES

ANTI-SEMITISM

An Overview

From: *History and Hate: The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism* (Jewish Publication Society of America: Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 3–14.

We shall never fully understand anti-Semitism. Deep-rooted, complex, endlessly persistent, constantly changing yet remaining the same, it is a phenomenon that stands at the intersection of history, sociology, economics, political science, religion, and psychology. But it is often the most elusive phenomena that are the most intriguing, and here fascination and profound historical significance merge to make this subject a central challenge to Jewish historians.

Despite its nineteenth-century context and its often inappropriate racial implications, the term *anti-Semitism* has become so deeply entrenched that resistance to its use is probably futile. The impropriety of the term, however, makes it all the more important to clarify as fully as possible the range of meanings that can legitimately be assigned to it. Essentially, anti-Semitism means either of the following: (1) hostility toward Jews as a group which results from no legitimate cause or greatly exceeds any reasonable, ethical response to genuine provocation; or (2) a pejorative perception of Jewish physical or moral traits which is either utterly groundless or a result of irrational generalization and exaggeration.

These definitions can place an atypical and sometimes unwelcome burden on historians, who must consequently make ethical judgments a central part of historical analysis. When is a cause legitimate or a provocation genuine? At what point does a generalization become irrational or a response exceedingly unethical? Most anti-Semites have unfortunately made such evaluations very simple, but, as Shaye Cohen indicates in his contribution to this volume, these questions become particularly acute when one deals with anti-Semitism in antiquity.

The earliest references to Jews in the Hellenistic world are positive ones, and the attraction of Judaism for many pagans continued well into the Christian era. When anti-Jewish sentiment arises, it can usually be explained by causative factors of a straightforward sort: Jewish refusal to worship local gods, missionizing, revolutionary activity, dietary separatism, and marital exclusivity. Some of these, at least, can be perceived as “legitimate” grievances, although a number of the pagan reactions so violate the requirements of proportionality that they cross the threshold into anti-Semitism. In any event, we have no reason to believe that we are dealing in this case with a phenomenon that resists ordinary historical explanation. If one were to insist on defining anti-Semitism as a pathology, then its existence in the ancient world has yet to be demonstrated.

As pagan antiquity gives way to the Christian Middle Ages, we confront the first crucial transition in the history of anti-Semitism. Much has been written about the question of continuity and disjunction at this point: Did Christianity, for all its original contributions to the theory of Jew-hatred, essentially continue a pre-existing strand in classical thought and society, or did it create virtually *de novo* a virulent strain that bears but a superficial resemblance to the anti-Semitism of old? Despite the sharpness of the formulation, the alternatives posed in this question are not, in fact, mutually exclusive. It would violate common sense to deny that classical anti-Semitism provided fertile soil for the growth of the medieval variety, and despite the demise of the ancient gods and the waning of Jewish missionizing and rebelliousness, some of the older grievances retained their force. Nevertheless, if ancient paganism had been replaced by a religion or ideology without an internal anti-Jewish dynamic, it is likely that the anti-Semitism of the classical world would have gradually faded. Instead, it was reinforced. The old, pedestrian causes of anti-Jewish animus were replaced by a new, powerful myth of extraordinary force and vitality.

Medieval Christian theology expresses a profound love-hate relationship with Judaism. Of all religions in the world, only Judaism may be tolerated under the cross, for Jews serve as unwilling, unwitting witnesses of Christian truth. This testimony arises from Jewish authentication of the Hebrew Scriptures, which in turn authenticate Christianity, but it also arises from Jewish suffering, whose severity and duration can be explained only as divine retribution for the sin of

the crucifixion. Hence, the same theology that accorded Jews a unique toleration required them to undergo unique persecution.

In the early Middle Ages, it was the tolerant element in this position that predominated. With the great exception of seventh-century Visigothic Spain, persecution of Jews in pre-Crusade Europe was sporadic and desultory; the regions north and west of Italy had no indigenous anti-Semitic tradition, and Christianity had not yet struck deep enough roots in mass psychology to generate the emotional force necessary for the wreaking of vengeance on the agents of the crucifixion. Early medieval Europeans worshipped Jesus, but it is not clear that they loved him enough.

This is not to say that the course of medieval anti-Semitism is to be charted by reference to religious developments alone, although religion is almost surely the crucial guide. The deterioration of Jewish security in the high Middle Ages and beyond corresponds to transformations in economic, political, and intellectual history as well; indeed, the fact that a variety of changes that may well have affected anti-Semitism unfolded in rough synchronism makes it difficult to untangle the causal skeins but at the same time provides a richer and more satisfying explanatory network.

Christian piety widened and deepened, and the spectacular outbreaks of Jew-hatred during the Crusades were surely nourished by pietistic excess. As mercantile and administrative experience spread through an increasingly literate and urbanized Christian bourgeoisie, the economic need for Jews declined precipitously; it is no accident that in the later Middle Ages Jews were welcome primarily in less-developed regions like thirteenth-century Spain and, even later, Bohemia, Austria, and Poland. To make matters worse, the remaining economic activity in which Jews came to be concentrated was a natural spawning-ground for intense hostility: Moneylending may be a necessity, but it does not generate affection. In the political sphere, the high Middle Ages saw the beginnings of a sense of national unity at least in France and England; although this fell short of genuine nationalism in the modern sense, it sharpened the perception of the Jew as the quintessential alien. Finally, despite the centrifugal effects of individual nationalisms, the concept of a monochromatic European Christendom also grew, and with it came heightened intolerance toward any form of deviation.

At a time of growing friction with ordinary Christians, Jews were obliged to look for protection to kings and churchmen. Since riots

against Jews violated the law and undermined public order, appeals for royal protection were sometimes heeded. Of equal importance, kings had begun to look upon Jewish holdings—and even upon the Jews themselves—as property of the royal treasury, with the ironic result that protection might well be forthcoming to safeguard the financial interests of the king. Alternatively, however, the process of fiscal exploitation and confiscation could just as easily culminate in outright expulsion.

Appeals to the clergy produced similarly mixed results. The theoretical position of canon law concerning Jewish toleration was no longer a self-evident assumption governing the status of the Jews in a relatively tolerant society; it required constant reaffirmation in a Europe where it had frequently become not only the last line of Jewish defense but also the first. It was for this reason alone that St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who had little affection for Jews, intervened to save Jewish lives during the second crusade, and it is symptomatic of the new circumstances that a Jewish chronicler considers it noteworthy that he took no money for this intervention. Moreover, fissures were developing in the theory of toleration itself. The Talmud was investigated in Paris and burned at the behest of the Church; on occasion, even expulsions came to be regarded as not altogether inconsistent with a policy of toleration, since they fell short of the shedding of blood. Only the innate conservatism characteristic of any system of religious law protected the core of the position from concerted attack, so that Jews could continue to hope—ever more wistfully—for the protection of an increasingly hostile Church.

As the Middle Ages drew to a close, a new specter began haunting the Jews of Europe—the specter of demonology. The growing importance of the devil and his minions in late medieval Europe far transcends the Jewish question. Nevertheless, plague, war, and depression created an atmosphere, especially in northern lands, in which the explanation for terror and tragedy was sought in the alliance between the Jewish adversary and the Adversary himself. Jews, it was said, perpetrated ritual murder, consuming the blood—and sometimes the hearts—of their victims; Jews poisoned wells and Jewish doctors poisoned patients; consecrated hosts were stolen, pierced, and beaten; the Jewish stench and other unique illnesses and deformities underscored the alienness and dubious humanity of the lecherous vicars of Satan. It was not only the folk imagination that could depict a Jewish woman who gives birth

to swine; fifteenth-century intellectuals from Spain to Bohemia could speak of Jews as the offspring of a liaison between Adam and demons or as the product not of the patriarchs' seed but of their excrement. The vulgar fulminations in the late works of Luther did not arise *ex nihilo*.

The perception of Jews as forces of darkness in the most fearsome and tangible sense was especially conducive to the expulsions and brutalities that mark late medieval Jewish history, but the belief that Jewish alienness transcends religious differences was important in another context as well. When Jews converted to Christianity singly or in tiny groups, it was relatively easy to accept them unreservedly with the full measure of Christian love. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Spain, however, Christians had to deal with the new phenomenon of mass conversion. This, of course, created economic tensions that are not generated by individual conversions, but it must also have produced a psychological dilemma: It is extraordinarily difficult for a society to transform its attitude toward an entire group virtually overnight. There were, it is true, plausible arguments that the religious sincerity of these new Christians left something to be desired; nevertheless, the reluctance to accord them a full welcome into the Christian fold went beyond such considerations. Despite the absence of a prominent demonic motif, the Marranos faced at least an embryonic manifestation of racial anti-Semitism, which served as a refuge for a hostile impulse that could no longer point to palpable distinctions.

This figure of the hated new Christian adumbrates the hated acculturated Jew of later centuries and points the way toward the crucial transition to modern times. Like the passing of pagan antiquity and the emergence of Christian dominance, the waning of the Middle Ages was marked by fundamental ideological change. By the eighteenth century, Christianity began to lose its hold on important elements of the intellectual elite, and once again there seemed to be potential for the eradication or radical weakening of anti-Semitism. The transition of the eighteenth century, however, was far more complex than that of the fourth.

First of all, the old ideology did not disappear. There were areas of Europe, most notably in the east, where the commitment to traditional forms of Christianity retained its full force into the nineteenth century and beyond. Even in the west, large sectors of the early modern population remained immune to the impact of Enlightenment and

secularization, so that old-style hostility to Jews could continue to flourish. A second complicating factor is that this time there are periods and places in which anti-Semitism *did* wane, and analysis of its modern manifestations must balance explanations for persistence against reasons for decline. Finally, the stated reasons for modern Jew-hatred are more varied and mutable than their medieval equivalents. In the Middle Ages, whatever the role of economic and political factors, the religious basis for anti-Semitism was a constant throughout the period, forming a permanent foundation that served as both underlying reason and stated rationale. In the modern era, on the other hand, we are presented with a shifting, dizzying kaleidoscope of often contradictory explanations: The Jews are Rothschilds and paupers, capitalists and communists, nationalists and deracinated cosmopolitans, religious separatists and dangerous free thinkers, evil geniuses and the possessors of superficial, third-rate minds.

We must beware of easy psychological reductionism, which excuses the historian from a careful examination of the complexities of modern anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, this list of grievances against Jews suggests that by the modern period anti-Semitism had reached the level of a deeply rooted pathology. It is precisely because Jews were the only significant minority in medieval Christian Europe that the fear and hatred of the alien became fixed upon them; a fixation that develops over a millennium is not uprooted merely by the slow weakening of its major cause. Hence, the arguments proposed by modern anti-Semites—and by historians who try to understand them—reflect a complex interweaving of reason and rationalization, of genuine cause and shifting, often elusive excuse.

With the passing of Christian dominance, anti-Semitism in the modern West came to be associated with other ideological issues that in large measure replaced Christianity as the focus of European concerns. The first of these was nationalism. At first glance, the egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution appears utterly incompatible with the persistence of Jewish disabilities, and the emancipation of the Jews was, in fact, achieved. But the increasing power of the national state—and its increasing demands—provided ammunition for a new, exceptionally powerful argument against such emancipation. The eighteenth-century state demanded not only its residents' toil and sweat but also their hearts and souls: full loyalty, total identification, fervent patriotism. Moreover,

the breakdown of the old regime's corporate structure required the citizen to engage in an unmediated relationship with the centralized state. Jews, it was said, failed these tests. In descent and behavior, in communal structure and emotional ties, Jews were an alien nation, a state within a state, no more deserving of citizenship than Frenchmen in Germany or Germans in France. Since the nature of the state had changed so much that retention of medieval status was hardly a realistic option, this analysis posed no small threat to Jewish security.

The only viable response, it seemed, was the denial of Jewish nationhood. So Jews denied it—and they denied it sincerely. There is at least faint irony in Jews' declaring that they are not a nation while anti-Semites vigorously affirm that they are, but the gradual spread of Jewish emancipation through much of nineteenth-century Europe awakened feelings of genuine, profound patriotism that led to the defining of Judaism in the narrowest confessional terms. Until late in the century, this sacrifice—which most western Jews considered no sacrifice at all—appeared to have achieved its goal. Barriers crumbled, discrimination eased, redemption-in-exile appeared at hand.

Nevertheless, like so many earlier, more traditional instances of messianic aspirations, this one too was doomed to disappointment. The more Jews behaved like Christians, the stranger it seemed that they would not become Christians, and even in a more secularized age, conversion remained the symbol and *sine qua non* of full entry into Gentile society. On occasion, an act of acculturation and rapprochement would paradoxically lead to increased tensions. Reform Judaism, for example, de-emphasized ritual while stressing ethics, much as liberal Protestantism had elevated ethics and downgraded dogma. However, in the absence of conversion of Reform Jews, this agreement on content led to an acrimonious dispute as to which religion had the legitimate claim to the ethical message preached by both sides, and Christian denigration of Jewish ethics became a theme that bordered on anti-Semitism. In a broader context, even Christian supporters of Jewish emancipation had generally expected it to bring about the gradual disappearance of the Jews, and the failure of most Jews to cooperate left a sense of disquiet and frustration. Additionally, as Todd Endelman stresses in this volume, the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century was part of a general rebellion against the liberalism and modernity that were responsible for emancipating the Jews.

In a world of acculturated Jews, how was this new anti-Semitism to be expressed? Many of the anti-Semitic political parties pressed economic and religious grievances of a quite traditional sort, but there were difficulties in arguing that the Jews of France and Germany were so different from Christians that they posed a genuine, alien threat. There was, however, a more promising approach—explosive, sinister, closer to the psychic wellsprings of popular anti-Semitism, and immune to the argument that Jews were, after all, “improving.” Racial categories were prominent and universal in nineteenth-century European thought; to some degree they had been used against Jews from the earliest days of emancipation, and Jews themselves evinced no hesitation in assigning special characteristics—sometimes even physical ones—to the Jewish “race.” For anti-Semites—and it is in this context that the term was coined—the “polluted” racial character of the Jews served, as it had in the Marrano period, as a basis for hating people whose distinctiveness could not readily be discerned. The unacculturated Jew was a visible enemy; the acculturated one—despite caricatures of Jewish physical traits—was insidious, camouflaged, coiled to strike at European society from within. Jewish acculturation was no longer a promise; it was a threat.

It is no accident that the worst manifestation of Jew-hatred in history was built upon this foundation. Nazi anti-Semitism achieved such virulent, unrestrained consequences precisely because it stripped away the semi-civilized rationales that had been given in the past for persecuting Jews and liberated the deepest psychic impulses that had been partly nurtured but partly suppressed by those rationales. Although the Nazis used the standard political, economic, and sometimes even religious arguments for persecution, their central message was that Jews were alien, demonic creatures, subhuman and superhuman at the same time, who threatened “Aryans” with racial corruption and with profound, almost inexpressible terror. Such feelings were probably a part of the anti-Semitic psyche for centuries, and I have already argued that the deeply rooted fear and hatred of the alien had become fixed upon the Jews; nevertheless, these feelings had not been given free reign. The persecution of political enemies, economic exploiters, and religious deviants must still be governed by a modicum of civilized restraint; although this restraint must have seemed invisible to the victims of the Crusades, it reappears, however dimly, when seen through

the prism of the Holocaust. On the other hand, malevolent demons, racial aliens, and malignant vermin can be extirpated with single-minded, ruthless ferocity.¹

One of the most significant reactions to the new anti-Semitism was the rise of Jewish nationalism. To many observers—including many Jews—this was an abrogation of the original, unwritten contract granting Jews emancipation; nevertheless, the Zionist movement did not play a major role in the upsurge of European anti-Semitism in the decades before the Holocaust. Its impact on anti-Semitism came in different, quite unexpected ways: in the grafting of western Jew-hatred onto the traditional patterns of discrimination in the Muslim world, and in providing a new outlet and a new camouflage for the anti-Semitic impulse.

Pre-modern Jews had flourished and suffered under Islam, but anti-Jewish sentiment rarely reached the heights that it attained in the Christian world. This was partly because Jews were never the only minority in the Muslim orbit, but it was also because Judaism did not play the crucial role in Islam that it did in Christianity. The frequent Christian obsession with Jews was nourished in large measure by resentment toward a parent with whom intimate contact could not be avoided; Islam's relationship with Judaism lacked that intimacy and hence failed to generate the sort of tensions that explode into violence. Persecutions of Jews in the Muslim world should not be minimized, but they are not of the same order of magnitude as anti-Jewish outbreaks in the Christian West.

However persuasive the claim of the Jewish people may be to its ancestral homeland, the failure of Arabs to embrace the Zionist immigrants was hardly unexpected and is not in itself grounds for a charge of anti-Semitism. But offended nationalist sentiments and old-style denigration of Jews combined to make the Arab world receptive to anti-Semitic propaganda ranging from *Mein Kampf* to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. (The assertion that Arabs, as Semites, cannot be anti-Semitic is, of course, an overliteral and usually disingenuous argument.) Moreover, extreme forms of anti-Zionism outside the Arab world serve as a vehicle for anti-Semitic sentiments that are no longer respectable

¹ Much of the language in this paragraph is borrowed from my "Jewish-Christian Relations: A Jewish Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983): 23.

in their unalloyed, naked form. Here again there are genuine problems of definition, but “anti-Zionist” literature in the Soviet Union and the widespread application to Israel of an egregious double standard make it difficult to deny that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are not infrequently synonymous. The positions of the emancipation period have been reversed: Jews now lay claim to a nationhood that their enemies deny.

Anti-Semitism is no longer an acknowledged pillar of western thought and society. The distinguished medievalist R. W. Southern, in evaluating the normalcy or eccentricity of a major medieval churchman, correctly classified his “deep hostility toward the Jews” among the arguments for normalcy; had the subject of his evaluation been a contemporary western figure, such a classification would have been more than dubious. Despite the unspeakable agonies of twentieth-century European Jewry, anti-Semitism has not been wholly intractable.

At the same time, the nineteenth-century mixture of hope and expectation that Jew-hatred would fade away has proved to be a fantasy, and few indeed continue to indulge such dreams—surely not the Jew at a recent conference who confided his fears of the aftermath of nuclear war. He does not fear radiation, or climatic change, or wounds crying vainly for treatment; he worries instead that the war will be blamed on Einstein, Oppenheimer, and Teller.

Macabre Jewish humor, no doubt, or simple paranoia.

And yet . . .

THE
MIDDLE
AGES

FROM CRUSADES TO BLOOD LIBELS TO EXPULSIONS

Some New Approaches to Medieval Anti-Semitism

The Second Victor J. Selmanowitz Memorial Lecture. Touro College
Graduate School of Jewish Studies (New York, 1997).

Despite ubiquitous, ritualized gestures of obeisance toward Salo Baron's rejection of the "lachrymose conception" of Jewish history, most historians of medieval Jewry continue to employ a periodization structured by patterns of toleration and persecution. On the whole, the Jewish condition in the early Middle Ages emerges as relatively stable and secure, while the later period is marked by a growing hostility which finally erupts into libels, pogroms and expulsions.

Sweeping generalizations are, of course, always vulnerable to attack, and this one more than most. Even if limited, as it is, to Christian Europe, it characterizes the treatment of a dispersed group across a thousand years and a multitude of political and cultural boundaries. Thus, all observers make an exception for the persecution of Jews in seventh-century Visigothic Spain. Beyond this instance, some historians have raised more general questions about what they see as a rose-colored perception of the early period. Kenneth Stow, for example, challenges the view that Jews were treated so well in the early Middle Ages that one can justly speak of an alliance with Christian rulers or even of Jewish political power.¹ Although his rejection of this position unquestionably has concrete ramifications for our perception of early medieval Jewry, what he substitutes for a political alliance which ultimately breaks down is a legal status which ultimately becomes anomalous. The fundamental periodization remains intact.

¹ Kenneth R. Stow, *Alienated Minority: The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 3–4.

Within this general framework, the effort to locate more precise transitions immediately raises the specter of the crusade of 1096, an event which looms large in the Jewish popular imagination as well as in the works of historians. In his important studies of the catastrophe which befell the Jews of the Rhineland, Robert Chazan has argued against the position that it was a watershed, primarily on the grounds that Northern European Jewry in the following century achieved economic growth and extraordinary cultural creativity in an environment of relative toleration.² The transforming significance of the first crusade can also be challenged from the other direction—by underscoring evidence of significant persecution in Northern Europe beginning with the early years of the eleventh century.

One item of such evidence is the series of attacks around the year 1010 to which we shall presently return. No less significant are the indications of routine violence against eleventh-century Jews, but here we face a methodological question of great interest and wide application. In a brief passage marked by his typical erudition and care, Avraham Grossman has noted a number of sources in which Jews report looting of Jewish homes, roads so dangerous that “no Jew comes or goes,” and fear that a city-wide tragedy would generate attacks on the Jewish community.³

The problem here is to distinguish the generic unrest of an extremely violent society from “bias crimes” directed specifically against Jews. Grossman is not insensitive to this point. On one occasion, for example, he argues that a reference to the looting of “the houses of all the Jews” makes it clear that the violence was targeted. While he may well be correct in this case, the argument is not decisive, and the reference to dangerous roads is even less compelling. Members of a minority group with a powerful self-consciousness of their subordinate position tend to perceive attacks in personal terms even if the identity of the victim was irrelevant or marginal in the eyes of the perpetrator; sometimes, they may make specific reference to Jews simply because that is the universe of discourse of both the writer and his audience.

² Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1987), pp. 197–210; Chazan, *In the Year 1096: The First Crusade and the Jews* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1996), pp. 127–132. In a forthcoming article on the fast of 20 Sivan, David Wachtel has made some valuable observations on the deep impact that must nonetheless be attributed to these events.

³ Avraham Grossman, *Hakhmei Ashkenaz ha-Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 12–13.

In his very recent *Communities of Violence*, an excellent work concentrating on the later Middle Ages in the South of Europe, David Nirenberg has noted the problem of classifying violent crimes on the basis of unproven religious motivations. He presents the issue extremely well but puts it aside on the grounds that the medievals' legal perception of violence across religious boundaries, at least in the Crown of Aragon, saw it through the prism of those boundaries.⁴ This does not resolve the question if we are interested, as we are here, in the motivation of attackers who were neither lawyers nor theologians. As contemporary authorities have discovered while struggling to determine whether a particular mugging should be classified as a bias crime, it is no easy task to decide whether even the racist who shouted, "Nigger!" as he relieved his victim of his wallet was motivated primarily by greed, primarily by bigotry, or by an equal measure of each. It is a foregone conclusion that the victim in that case would see himself as the object of a racially inspired attack, and such feelings may exist—at times justly, at times not—even when no epithet was heard. Standing alone, sporadic Jewish testimony to anti-Jewish violence must be utilized with care.

Nirenberg also raises a much larger question which stands as a challenge to the fundamental enterprise addressed in this lecture. The overarching patterns limned by "teleological, *longue durée*" history tend to disappear, he says, when one looks closely at individual events. The point is of central importance provided that we apply it with due moderation. *Longue durée* history should indeed not allow us to forget that Jews could live in relative security well beyond a "turning point," and that a horrific event can be followed by a return to normalcy. Eleazar Gutwirth, for example, has recently argued that the Jewish community of Spain remained creative and even optimistic well after the "watershed" pogroms of 1391.⁵ Local conditions, which depend on a multitude of factors, will often be decisive for a particular community, and even in the midst of a massive wave of persecutions such as those spawned in Franconia from 1298 to 1300 by the host desecration charge, "the universal narrative was always told and unfolded within the immediate context of power and politics of a town and its region."⁶

⁴ *Communities of Violence* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 30–32.

⁵ E. Gutwirth, "Towards Expulsion: 1391–1492," in *Spain and the Jews: The Sephardi Experience, 1492 and After*, ed. by Elie Kedourie (London, 1992), pp. 51–73.

⁶ Miri Rubin, "Desecration of the Host: The Birth of an Accusation," in *Christianity and Judaism*, ed. by Diana Wood (Oxford, 1992), p. 184.

The same caveat applies on the wider canvas of national rather than local politics. In 1992, I organized a session at the conference of the Association for Jewish Studies on medieval expulsions of Jews in comparative perspective. Robert C. Stacey and William C. Jordan discussed the expulsions from England and France respectively. Despite the fact that these events took place in neighboring countries less than two decades apart and both analyses focused on relations between the king and the local aristocracy, the explanations proposed were so disparate that one could easily have come away with the sense that the proximity of both geography and chronology was entirely coincidental.⁷

This was of course not the case, as both participants took pains to note, and their feeling of unease at such a perception illustrates the dangers of too dismissive an approach to *longue durée* history. We cannot allow the trees, or even the groves, to persuade us that there is no forest. In the final paragraph of his book, Nirenberg concedes that cataclysmic events like those of 1391 can “indelibly alter the world in which they occurred, refiguring the field of meaning in their ritual lexicon.”⁸ Changes of perception, whether they result from cataclysm or more gradual developments, fundamentally transform the psychology of a society, so that courses of action that would never have been entertained as anything but a fantasy or an intellectual exercise become real, even seductive options. To take a narrow example, an unhappy marriage in a society in which divorce, though legal, is almost unthinkable is far more likely to last than the same marriage in an environment where relationships are routinely dissolved. The same local or national conditions can engender very different results; an environment in which massacres or expulsions are seen as realistic possibilities is far more likely to produce them.

The second half of the Middle Ages, then, generated physical attacks, conversionary efforts, economic restrictions, the badge, campaigns against the Talmud, the three major accusations of ritual murder, host desecration, and well poisoning, and widespread expulsions. This is a real shift, and it legitimately calls for large scale explanatory efforts,

⁷ Stacey's analysis has now appeared in a Hebrew version. See his “Yahadut Angliah ba-Me'ah ha-Yod-Gimmel u-Be'ayat ha-Gerush” in *Gerush ve-Shivah: Yehudei Angliah be-Hillufei ha-Zemannim*, ed. by David Katz and Yosef Kaplan (Jerusalem, c. 1993), pp. 9–25.

⁸ *Communities of Violence*, p. 249.

always disciplined by the considerations of which Nirenberg so effectively reminds us.

It is far from clear that the primary explanation for such shifts lies in the specifics of the relationship between the dominant society and the particular minority group. Most contemporary Jews recoil at the suggestion that objectionable Jewish behavior produces, let alone justifies, anti-Semitism, though the instinct which generated movements for moral self-improvement as a weapon against hostility has not faded into total oblivion. But if it is not offensive Jewish behavior which engenders hatred, we need not assume that any concrete Jewish action or characteristic, or even a historical event involving Jews, is the key to understanding the transformation that we confront.

We might profitably pursue this point through a passing glance at a recent, benign development in the relationship between Christians and Jews. The received wisdom informs us that the Second Vatican Council's declaration in *Nostra Aetate* no. 4 that contemporary Jews bear no responsibility for the crucifixion and that Judaism retains spiritual value resulted from introspection which was occasioned by the Holocaust and encouraged by Jewish ecumenicists. While these factors were surely real, I believe that they were decidedly secondary.

Vatican II was convened in a post-colonial age marked by a new regard for self-determination and a new respect for cultural diversity—including religious diversity—as well as minority rights. Exclusivist claims did not sit well in this environment, and harsh punishment, even divine punishment, for religious dissent surely did not. A telling expression of the inner struggle triggered by the clash of this liberal, humanistic sensibility with a narrower, more forbidding tradition was formulated by a playwright hostile to Catholicism whose bitter work, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All To You*, nonetheless has its very funny moments. Sister Mary, an old-fashioned nun teaching in the aftermath of Vatican II, defines “limbo” for her classroom/audience. If I remember correctly, she displays a picture of a baby trapped behind the bars of a crib and declares, “Limbo is the place where unbaptized infants went before the Ecumenical Council.”

The historical and theological precision of this statement may leave something to be desired, but it brilliantly captures a central feature of the ideological atmosphere of the Council, which had nothing to do with Jews and next to nothing to do with the Holocaust. It was this spirit

that animated the adoption of a more positive attitude toward Islam and the religions of the East, the assertion that salvation is possible outside the Church—and *Nostra Aetate* no. 4. One who locates the fundamental impetus of the historic declaration on the Jews in the specifics of the Jewish-Catholic relationship loses sight of the larger process and misses the key point.

— II —

For medieval Europe, the most important recent effort to subsume the transformation of attitudes toward Jews under the rubric of a much broader change is R. I. Moore's *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*.⁹ Moore's essential argument proposes that economic, political, and cultural developments in the eleventh and twelfth centuries produced a new class or group of classes which needed to consolidate power in the face of elements which posed a threat to the evolving order. Thus, heretics, Jews, even lepers, began to face exclusion and persecution at approximately the same time; somewhat later, male homosexuals and witches faced a new level of hostility for similar reasons. As we shall see, even Moore cannot refrain altogether from an analysis of certain characteristics of medieval Jewry, if only to establish the plausibility of a Jewish threat, but the thrust of his argument points away from the particularities of Christian attitudes toward Judaism and Jews.

Though Nirenberg dislikes Moore's approach as an example of the suspect *longue durée* mode of historiography, his own analysis, for all its specificity, also marginalizes the particularities of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Through a comparative examination of the treatment of Jews and Muslims in Aragon, he reminds us, to take a single example, that not only the former were accused of poisoning wells. Thus, we can see Jews as a vulnerable group whose specific Jewishness is almost irrelevant.

In very recent years, we have witnessed the revival of a long-rejected interpretation of eleventh-century Europe which also sees Jews as one of several groups victimized by a larger transformation. Richard Landes' *Relics, Apocalypse, and the Deceits of History*,¹⁰ which has been

⁹ Oxford, 1987.

¹⁰ Cambridge, Mass., 1995.

described as probably “the best of a number of recent studies forcing reassessment of the central Middle Ages,”¹¹ maintains that eschatological expectations surrounding the millennium gripped the imagination of the European populace, generating a wide variety of religious and social movements. In an article specifically addressing the persecution of Jews, Landes has now argued for harmonizing Jewish and Christian accounts of persecutions which he dates in 1010 to produce a picture of sustained violence whose aetiology he locates in apocalyptic frenzy.¹²

Landes’ stimulating presentation merits careful attention, though I remain more skeptical than he about the dating and reliability of the major Jewish source describing these events.¹³ It is a virtual certainty that noteworthy attacks against the Jews of Northern Europe took place in approximately 1010; that these resulted from millennial eschatology is a possibility that has been restored to the historiographic map but continues to strike me as highly speculative. Should we embrace this possibility, we would then face a second, larger challenge which applies to Moore’s position as well. Do these interpretations purport to explain only the *genesis* of anti-Jewish violence by identifying the spark which kindled a conflagration but which, like the God of the Deists, did its deed and—in the words of a caustic observer—then went to Florida? Or is it possible that apocalyptic tension and a Jewish threat to the position of Christian elites persisted beyond the period of their initial appearance and provided an ongoing impetus to medieval Judeophobia?

¹¹ *The American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 433.

¹² Richard Landes, “The Massacres of 1010: On the Origins of Popular Violence in Western Europe,” in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. by Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden, 1996), pp. 79–112. Landes credits two earlier studies, which have in his view been unjustly ignored, with looking at these developments from the proper perspective. See Hans Liebeschütz, *Synagoga und Ecclesia* (Heidelberg, 1938, 2nd ed., 1983), and L. Dasberg, *Untersuchungen über die Entwertung des Judenstatus in 11. Jahrhundert* (Paris, 1965).

¹³ The most hostile treatment of the reliability of that source is Kenneth Stow, *The “1007 Anonymous” and Papal Sovereignty: Jewish Perceptions of the Papacy and Papal Policy in the High Middle Ages* (Cincinnati, 1984). I have reservations about important aspects of Stow’s argument, which he strengthens in one instance by unjustifiably conflating two disparate quotations in his source; see Robert Chazan’s review in *Speculum* 62 (1987): 728–731. At the same time, I am largely persuaded by his uneasiness at finding a strong and sophisticated Jewish presentation of the doctrine of papal sovereignty in an allegedly eleventh-century text.

Landes himself describes a “millennial generation” lasting in acute form until 1033, which is the thousandth anniversary of the Passion, and sees close links between this atmosphere and that of the late-eleventh-century crusade. This is self-evidently an important historiographic contention, but we cannot plausibly extend such a factor indefinitely, though it can surely make further appearances.¹⁴ Later medieval anti-Semitism will have to seek other sources of nourishment.

In Moore’s case, the process by which a new, literate elite established itself extends over a longer period of time than a millennial generation, but here too the explanation must lose its force after a decent interval. And once again, the initial contention itself bears scrutiny: Moore sees the Jewish threat to this elite as both economic/professional and intellectual/religious. Jews, he says, had a tradition of literacy and economic experience which stood in the way of aspiring Christian merchants and bureaucrats, and they had a developed understanding of Scripture which raised questions about the theological and exegetical enterprise which Christians were beginning to pursue with renewed sophistication.

With respect to the first point, it is difficult to agree that the tiny Jewish population of Northern Europe, however overrepresented it might have been in commerce, constituted the sort of obstacle to Christian entrepreneurs or government functionaries that would produce widespread persecution. The second assertion is particularly difficult to test. I have argued elsewhere that European Jews, especially in the North, did challenge Christian beliefs with surprising aggressiveness,¹⁵ but references to the challenge posed by Judaism do not appear with sufficient frequency in Christian literature to persuade me that it was a factor so compelling that it played a major role in the formation

¹⁴ See, for example, Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca and London, 1982), pp. 246–247, for references to Joachite eschatology as a possible secondary factor in the development of anti-Jewish attitudes in the thirteenth century. For the sixteenth century, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1984; German original, 1981), pp. 118–122; Kenneth Stow, *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy 1555–1593* (New York, 1977).

¹⁵ David Berger, “Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages,” *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 576–591.

of a persecuting society. Ironically, Moore's deemphasis of Jewish particularity in the development of medieval anti-Semitism requires him to attribute enormous importance to their role in European society so that they may fit into his larger explanatory scheme.

— III —

Other approaches to our problem appeal to factors which began in the eleventh or twelfth century but persisted through the end of the Middle Ages. There is nothing new about the view that increased piety at all levels of society played a critical role in the rise of hostility toward Jews. In an essay in which I shamelessly attempted to interpret the entire history of anti-Semitism in twelve pages, I noted this point by observing that before the eleventh century "Christianity had not yet struck deep enough roots in mass psychology to generate the emotional force necessary for the wreaking of vengeance on the agents of the crucifixion. Early medieval Europeans worshipped Jesus, but it is not clear that they loved him enough."¹⁶

Jeremy Cohen, in a major study which has deservedly become central to the discussion of medieval anti-Semitism, emphasized the role of Christian belief but shifted the focus from the piety of the masses to the theology of the elite. *The Friars and the Jews*¹⁷ argues that the very foundations of toleration were undermined by growing Christian familiarity with the Talmud. Through the efforts of Nicholas Donin, a thirteenth-century French Jewish convert to Christianity, Christians came to realize that (to borrow the sharp formulation of an acquaintance of mine) the Jews are the people of the book—but the book is not the Bible. Though Donin and others attacked the Talmud for blasphemy and hostility to Christians, Cohen sees the primary thrust as the argument that the Talmud was "another law." Since one of the cornerstones of the theology granting Jews toleration was the assumption that they preserve the law of the Hebrew Bible not only in their libraries but in their behavior, this argument was fraught with the most dire consequences.

¹⁶ See my "Anti-Semitism: An Overview," in *History and Hate: The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism*, ed. by David Berger (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 3–14 (quotation on p. 5).

¹⁷ See note 14.

Key aspects of Cohen's argument convince me, while others do not. I believe that Donin really was intent upon reversing the Church's fundamental policy of toleration and that the "other law" argument was his most important weapon. I also believe that this effort, in the long run, was not wholly ineffective; later medieval friars were greatly tempted by the blandishments of the argument, and by the end of the Middle Ages, some Christian scholars were saying things about forcible conversion that would have been inadmissible in earlier centuries.¹⁸

At the same time, the analysis does not place sufficient emphasis on the impact of Donin's other arguments, and, far more important, it does not accord appropriate consideration to the profound conservatism that marks all law, and particularly religious law. Later attacks on the Talmud, including arguments for rescinding toleration of Jews because of it, drew primarily upon allegations of hostility toward Gentiles (which, to the extent that it is embedded in Talmudic Law, could not easily be removed by censorship), secondarily upon assertions of blasphemy against Jesus (which could be more readily deleted), and only marginally if at all upon the contention that Jews are adherents of "another law."¹⁹

The deeper problem is that toleration of Jews was a matter of settled doctrine in medieval canon law. It was hard to avoid the impression that Donin was arguing that Church authorities from Augustine through a long line of Popes were simply mistaken about a key issue. In the thirteenth century, at least, the inadmissibility of such a conclusion was so clear that it was in the Jewish interest to argue that banning the Talmud was tantamount to banning Judaism, and this point appears to have carried considerable weight in the ultimate decision to permit the pursuit of Talmudic study. In a very recent article which addresses the question of why Jews, who were widely associated with witchcraft, were hardly ever prosecuted for their sorcery, Anna Foa alludes to this point. It may be, she suggests, that the Church avoided prosecuting Jews for the "heresy of witchcraft" for the same reason that the "new law" argument was abandoned: either step would have resulted in the

¹⁸ See, for example, R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 111–131.

¹⁹ See my "Christians, Gentiles, and the Talmud: a Fourteenth-Century Jewish Response to the Attack on Rabbinic Judaism," in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, ed. by Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 115–130.

classification of “all the Jews, qua Jews,” as heretics, thus breaking down the fundamental conceptual barriers that made the traditional toleration of Jews possible.²⁰

As time passed, however, the force of the doctrine of toleration eroded even as it was ritualistically affirmed. The tepid reaction of the Church to anti-Jewish massacres and the evolving sense that expulsions do not violate accepted doctrine are cases in point. A striking illustration of the gaping inconsistencies that arose out of the tension between a tolerant doctrine and an intolerant society—not excluding the clergy themselves—leaps out at the reader of R. Po-Chia Hsia’s account of the report of a papal commission on the trial of Jews for the ritual murder of Simon of Trent. Here the protective doctrine is not the overarching Augustinian argument for tolerating Jews but the Church’s determination that the blood accusation is a libel.

On June 20, 1478, a papal bull was published pursuant to the commission’s report.

[Pope] Sixtus IV cleared Hinderbach [the prince-bishop involved in the case who was urging approval for the cult of Simon] of all suspicions; the commission of cardinals, who had diligently examined all pertinent records, concluded that the [torture-ridden] trial had been conducted in conformity with legal procedure. Sixtus praised the bishop’s zeal but admonished Hinderbach, on his conscience, not to permit anything contrary to the 1247 Decretum of Innocent IV (which prohibited ritual murder trials) in promoting devotion to Simon nor to disobey the Holy See or canonical prescriptions. Moreover, Sixtus forbade any Christian, on this or any other occasion, without papal judgment, to kill or mutilate Jews, or extort money from them, or to prevent them from practicing their rites as permitted by law.²¹

In other words, Jews do not commit ritual murder, ritual murder trials are illegal, this ritual murder trial was conducted in accordance with

²⁰ Anna Foa, “The Witch and the Jew: Two Alikes that Were Not the Same,” in *From Witness to Witchcraft*, pp. 373–374. On “the persistence of traditional behavior,” see also Stow, *Alienated Minority*, pp. 242–247. Alexander Patschowsky has reacted to Cohen’s thesis by pointing to the fourteenth-century suggestion at high levels of the Church that killers of Jews be prosecuted as heretics; see his “Der ‘Talmudjude’: mittelalterlichen Ursprung eines neuzeitlichen Themas,” in *Juden in der christlichen Umwelt während des späten Mittelalters*, ed. by Alfred Haverkamp and Franz-Josef Ziwe (Berlin, 1992), p. 22.

²¹ R. Po-Chia Hsia, *Trent, 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial* (New Haven, 1992), p. 127.

legal procedures, and one may promote devotion to Simon of Trent, whose only claim to devotion is that he was martyred in a ritual murder, provided that one does not affirm the reality of ritual murder.

Thus far, I have presented Cohen's thesis in terms that are narrowly focused on Christian familiarity with a Jewish text, but there is a broader dimension as well. Decades ago, Salo Baron proposed a relationship between national unification and medieval anti-Semitism, arguing that "single nationality states," driven both by incipient feelings of nationalism and the intolerance of a monolithic society toward outsiders, were far more likely to be hostile to their Jews. Since such states tended to develop in the central and late Middle Ages, it was in that period that anti-Semitism peaked.²² Though Baron's thesis may help us understand national differences in the treatment of Jews, its arguably anachronistic appeal to nationalism and its failure to address the degree to which the transformation cut across national boundaries has marginalized it as a major explanatory strategy.

Cohen invokes a different sort of unity—the unity of Christendom as a whole. Thus, his emphasis on the Talmud is complemented by the argument that the friars' inclination to exclude the Jews was nourished by the growing sense that all of society is an organic Christian body. When the primacy of the Church as a unifying force began to decline, this inclination was not undermined; on the contrary, "the defensiveness characteristic of declining empires" reinforced the predisposition "to scrutinize the substance of contemporary Judaism and develop the theory of Jewish heresy."²³ I am somewhat uneasy about adopting a speculative argument which draws the same conclusion from an ascendant Church as from a declining one, particularly since at least some of the friars were severe critics rather than defenders of Rome. In any case, there is no intrinsic connection between the larger picture drawn by Cohen and the more specific argument which is the core of his extremely valuable study. Though both factors could of course be significant, the bulk of the work creates the impression that familiarity with the Talmud was the driving force behind the reevaluation of Jewish status. The concluding

²² Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed., vol 11 (New York, London, and Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 192–201. This section of Baron's magnum opus summarizes a thesis that he had first proposed much earlier.

²³ *The Friars and the Jews*, pp. 248–264 (quotation on p. 255).

chapter appears to suggest that it was primarily Christian unity which inspired the impulse to exclude Jews, and the Talmud was the available means to do so.

— IV —

If only because of the prominence of the Jewish moneylender in popular images of the Jew, economic explanations of medieval anti-Semitism have always enjoyed considerable prominence. The central Middle Ages witnessed the development of a profit economy. To the extent that Jews had owned significant lands—and it is very difficult to assess the dimensions of such ownership—they tended to become urbanized and eventually engaged in moneylending to a degree considerably disproportionate to their numbers. Despite the unquestionable value of Joseph Shatzmiller's revisionist *Shylock Reconsidered*, which documents friendly relations between a beleaguered Jewish moneylender and his Christian customers, there is no doubt that this profession was not conducive to feelings of warmth and amity.²⁴

Moreover, the transformation of the economic landscape was accompanied by the growth of a literate class. We have already encountered Moore's emphasis on the competition that this development engendered with the established literate class of the Jews. Even if we hesitate to speak of fierce competition, we can certainly recognize the impact of this change on the society's economic or administrative need for an increasingly marginalized minority. To the extent that even the undeveloped economy of the early Middle Ages had some need for an educated class—and it did—that need was partially met by Jews; the profit economy required a greater number of educated people, but it generated a sufficient supply from within the Christian community itself. This consideration may well loom large in explaining the welcome granted late medieval Jews in the economically and culturally undeveloped lands of central and Eastern Europe in the late Middle Ages, well after they had worn out their welcome in the developed countries of the West.

²⁴ J. Shatzmiller, *Shylock Reconsidered: Jews, Moneylending, and Medieval Society* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1990). Cf. William C. Jordan's beautifully formulated reservations in an essentially appreciative review: see *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 82 (1991): 221–223.

In his *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*,²⁵ Lester K. Little has attempted to weave a psychological explanation of anti-Semitism into the fabric of economic change. Christians, he says, experienced wrenching moral conflicts in confronting the profit economy. Guilt over usury, pawnbroking, even the sale of religious objects and outright theft was projected on to the Jews, who became “scapegoat[s] for Christian failure to adapt successfully to the profit economy.” Jews were limited “to occupations thought by Christian moralists to be sinful and then harass[ed] . . . for doing their jobs.”²⁶ It is unfair to ask for hard evidence for this sort of psychological assertion, and historiography would be a far less interesting, fecund, and instructive enterprise if we systematically refrained from such speculations. Still, in the absence of evidence one can react to this suggestion only by putting the question to one’s informed intuitions. Since the Christian masses did not engage in the economic “sins” of which the Jews were accused, my own instincts do not permit me more than a whispered “perhaps.”²⁷

— V —

The most widely discussed theory of medieval anti-Semitism in the last few years is undoubtedly the one presented by Gavin Langmuir in his very impressive twin volumes, *History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism*, and *Toward A Definition of Anti-Semitism*.²⁸ Here too we find a psychological explanation, but it is rooted in much different considerations involving a redefinition of anti-Semitism itself and careful but creative speculation about the reaction of Christians to new developments in their own religion.

To Langmuir, hostility toward Jews before the twelfth century was an unremarkable version of ordinary xenophobia. Like all forms of bigotry, it exaggerated, distorted, and generalized real characteristics of the hated group. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, something frighteningly special occurred: Jews came to be subjected to accusations of a wholly chimerical sort. The entire group was stigmatized

²⁵ Ithaca, New York, 1978.

²⁶ *Religious Poverty*, pp. 54–56.

²⁷ It is true that Little (p. 54) also speaks of the projection of guilt feelings for violence, which the masses did perpetrate, but violence predates the central Middle Ages, and an appeal to specifically anti-Jewish violence raises the specter of circularity.

²⁸ Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1990.

as ritual murderers, consumers of human flesh and blood, desecrators of hosts, and poisoners of wells despite the fact that not one Jew had ever been observed in the act of committing a single one of these crimes. Such accusations—and only such accusations—deserve the unique appellation “anti-Semitism.”

What could have caused this new departure? Langmuir believes that Christians in the High Middle Ages, faced with profoundly difficult doctrines like transubstantiation, began to entertain grave doubts about the irrational demands made upon them by their evolving faith. One solution was to deflect these doubts by attributing irrational beliefs and behavior to Jews, whose very presence was a disturbing challenge to the dogmas with which Christians were struggling. It was not Christians, then, but Jews who came to embody irrationality *par excellence*.

There can be little question that some Christians were deeply troubled by the doctrine that the object which looked, felt, and tasted like bread was in fact the body of Jesus, and there is much plausibility in the suggestion that the host desecration charge, which in some cases implied that Jews themselves recognize the numinous character of this bread, could help to allay such doubts. As Miri Rubin put it in a study of this accusation, “The tale’s force derived from the rich world of eucharistic knowledge and myth which was being imparted at the very heart of the religious culture, and it was bolstered by an ongoing tension between the eucharistic claims and the realities or appearances which most people apprehended in and around it.”²⁹

Langmuir, however, goes much further by placing the “chimerical” accusations in a separate category and connecting all of them to the inner doubts of Christians. Several scholars have noted that the sharp distinction between normal xenophobia and accusations without a shred of empirical basis is highly problematic. In lengthy reviews of Langmuir’s book, Robert Stacey argued persuasively that by medieval criteria, the evidence that Jews commit ritual murder was not without rational foundation, and Marc Saperstein made the even stronger point that we cannot be certain even today that no Jew ever desecrated a host.³⁰

²⁹ “Desecration of the Host,” p. 184.

³⁰ Robert C. Stacey, “History, Religion, and Medieval Anti-Semitism: A Response to Gavin Langmuir,” *Religious Studies Review* 20 (1994): 95–101; Marc Saperstein, “Medieval Christians and Jews: A Review Essay,” *Shofar* 8:4 (Summer, 1990): 1–10. See also Chazan, *In the Year 1096*, pp. 143–146.

Indeed, although obtaining a consecrated host was no simple matter and there is no reason to believe that any medieval Jew bothered to take the risk, I have little doubt that if such a Jew had found himself in possession of this idolatrous object symbolizing the faith of his oppressors, it would not have fared very well in his hands.³¹ Any definition whose validity is entirely dependent on the assumption that a particular act never happened even once is likely to find itself in a precarious position.

Moreover, as I noted in a much briefer review, even if we attribute antisemitic accusations to psychic insecurity—and the evidence for this is quite thin—that insecurity need not take the form of religious uncertainty. The turbulent world of late medieval Europe was not incapable of producing other forms of emotional dislocation. “Indeed, [Langmuir’s] parallel discussion of modern times inevitably refers to inner tensions involving self-esteem and the role of the individual in society rather than traditional religious doubts.”³² Most recently, Anna Sapir Abulafia, without rejecting Langmuir’s thesis for some Christians, argues that others were genuinely persuaded that the proper use of reason demonstrates the truth of Christianity so clearly that the Jews’ failure to see this calls their very humanity into question. She sees no real evidence to regard this position as a result of “irrationality caused by suppressed doubts,” and I think that she is right.³³

Finally, let me emphasize that whatever my reservations about Langmuir’s analysis, I do not reject on principle the position that the doctrine of transubstantiation may have had a significant effect on Jewish insecurity beyond the host desecration charge itself. Indeed, I am

³¹ In “Mission to the Jews,” p. 589, I alluded to the story in Joseph Official’s *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, ed. by Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 14, which describes a Jew who was seen urinating on a cross and proceeded to produce a clever justification. See also Joseph Shatzmiller, “Mi-Gilluyeha shel ha-Antishemiyyut bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim: Ha’ashamat ha-Yehudim be-Hillul ha-Zelav,” in *Mehqarim be-Toledot Am Yisrael ve-Erez Yisrael*, vol. 5 (Haifa, 1980), pp. 159–173, and the observations on the relationship between host desecration charges and other accusations of Jewish acts of desecration in Friedrich Lotter, “Hostienfrevolverwurf und Blutwunderfälschung bei den Judenverfolgungen von 1298 (‘Rindfleisch’) und 1336–1338 (‘Armleder’),” in *Fälschungen im Mittelalter*, vol. 5 (Hannover, 1988), pp. 543–548. Yisrael Yuval, “Ha-Naqam ve-ha-Qelalah, ha-Dam ve-ha-‘Alilah,” *Zion* 58 (1992/93): 52, n. 77, properly endorses Lotter’s position that not every accusation that Jews desecrated Christian sancta should automatically be rejected as unfounded.

³² *The American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 1498–1499.

³³ Anna Sapir Abulafia, “Twelfth-Century Renaissance Theology and the Jews,” in *From Witness to Witchcraft*, pp. 128–132. In general, see her *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (London and New York, 1995).

inclined to think that the belief that the body of Jesus was regularly sacrificed in Christian ritual greatly increased Christian receptivity to the assertion that Jews sacrificed his surrogates in their own perverted fashion. Where the belief in the “real presence” waned, the blood libel found considerably less fertile soil.

— VI —

If Langmuir’s thesis has generated the broadest discussion of our issue in the last few years, a more narrowly focused article about the ritual murder charge has produced the most explosive one. About five years ago, Yisrael Yuval published a lengthy Hebrew essay with the intriguing title, “The Vengeance and the Curse, the Blood and the Libel.”³⁴ What he had to say generated fascination, controversy, even anger, to the point where the journal in which the study appeared devoted a double issue to multifaceted responses followed by the author’s rejoinder.³⁵

In ruthlessly compressed form, Yuval’s thesis makes the following argument:

1. The vengeance: A great divide separated Ashkenazic and Sephardic perceptions of the fate of Gentiles at the end of days. The former anticipated a vengeful redemption, the latter a proselytizing one. While Sephardim envisioned a world in which all nations will recognize the God of Israel, Ashkenazim elaborated a tradition attested in midrashic and liturgical texts which described how the blood of Jewish martyrs splatters and stains the royal cloak of the Lord until the time when He will avenge that blood in a campaign of devastation and annihilation against the Gentile world which had shed it. Despite the dearth of typical Messianic movements among Ashkenazim, they looked forward to this event with acute eschatological anticipation.

2. The curse: On the Day of Atonement and during the Passover Seder, the Ashkenazic liturgy was marked by curses against the Gentiles. This too is a manifestation of the specifically Ashkenazic vision of redemption and should probably be seen as a quasi-magical effort to hasten the much-awaited moment of divine vengeance. Northern European Jewry was not without its unique form of Messianic activism.

³⁴ “Ha-Naqam ve-ha-Qelalah, Ha-Dam ve-ha-‘Alilah,” *Zion* 58 (1992/93): 33–90.

³⁵ *Zion* 59: 2–3 (1994).

3. The blood: During the first crusade, some Rhineland Jews killed their own children. While the motive of preventing forced apostasy is self-evident, one chronicle approvingly recounts the story of a Jew who killed both himself and his children after the crusading army had already left as an act of atonement for his conversion during the earlier attack. To the chronicler, personal atonement is only part of the story. A key element in the narratives of such killings is the capacity of the victims' blood to arouse divine vengeance and hence hasten the redemption. In the later discourse, if not in the events themselves, the martyrs' death "was intended (*no'ad*) not merely to sanctify God's name but to arouse Him to revenge."³⁶

4. The libel: No satisfactory explanation exists for the genesis of the ritual murder accusation. The widely held perception that it was born in England with the death of William of Norwich in 1144 is erroneous. A careful examination reveals that it originated in Würzburg in 1147 or even in Worms in 1096, that is, in Germany during the first or second crusade, while the earliest suggestion that William was killed by Jews did not emerge until 1149. There is good reason to speculate that a major impetus for this false accusation was the real behavior of Jews in killing their own children. Christians were probably aware of some aspects of points 1, 2, and 3, and they transformed the Jewish belief in divine eschatological vengeance and the "blood sacrifice" designed to arouse the Lord to carry out that vengeance into a libel in which the hostility of known child killers is directed toward more logical victims, namely, the children of the hated Christians themselves. The accusation of ritual murder, utterly false as it is, was extrapolated from genuine Jewish behavior.

This is a provocative thesis provocatively formulated. "The [Christian] narrative," writes Yuval, "sets forth Jewish murderousness and desire for revenge. These two motifs are not fabrications *ex nihilo*; rather, they follow from a distorted interpretation of Jewish behavior during the persecutions in 1096 and of the ritual of vengeance which was part of the Jews' eschatological conception. "This lie," he concludes, playing on a Rabbinic aphorism, "had legs."³⁷ It is hardly surprising that the article evoked a sharp response.

³⁶ "Ha-Naqam," p. 70.

³⁷ "Ha-Naqam," p. 86.