

Preface

Ashkenaz appears in a genealogy of the descendants of Noah after the Flood: He was great-grandson to Noah, grandson to Japheth, son to Gomer, and brother to Riphath and Togarmah (Gen. 10:3). The biblical text sums up the list of progeny by explaining that “from these the nations branched out over the earth after the Flood” (Gen. 10:32), leaving postbiblical readers to match Noah’s heirs to contemporary nations. For Jews living in medieval Europe, Ashkenaz referred to Germany, although the only rabbinic source from late antiquity to correlate the biblical list with current nations associates Germany with either Togarmah or Magog, Gomer’s brother, rather than with Ashkenaz.

The accepted term for France in the Middle Ages is Zarephath (Obad. 1:20), but in this study, as in most modern usage, Ashkenaz refers to France also. This makes historical sense, given the unification of these lands under Carolingian rule and especially given the close cultural ties between the Jews of these two centers. The terminological and ethnic distinction between France and Germany faded following the eastward migration of large numbers of central European Jews in the late Middle Ages; this migration created the enormous diaspora of eastern Europe, the cradle of roughly half of modern Jewry (the Jews of medieval England and Provence are historically linked to those of France, but they are largely irrelevant to this study and will scarcely be mentioned).

The genetic and cultural link between the Jews of eastern Europe and medieval Franco-Germany explains the prominence of the latter in the heritage and identity of modern Jewry, not only in Europe but also in today’s leading demographic and cultural Jewish centers—Israel and the United States. Important facets of the cultural heritage

and self-image of millions of Jews can be traced back to the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz, and they continue to resonate.

Hence we come to the chronological focus of this book, the first quarter of the second millennium CE, the formative period of Ashkenazic Jewry and its heyday. Jewish communities began springing up along the Rhine in the early decades of the tenth century, and a century of intellectual growth culminated in Rashi, or Solomon of Troyes (1040–1105), whose commentaries on the Bible and Babylonian Talmud have been the foundation of Jewish education everywhere from that day to this. The Talmud has dictated the law and lifestyle of the Jewish people for the last thousand years, and even young students move fairly quickly from Rashi's Talmud commentary to Tosafot, the glosses penned by twelfth- and thirteenth-century French scholars. The study of Rashi and Tosafot became, and remains, the staple of the traditional curriculum.

The years 1000–1250 also saw the emergence of a second feature of the Ashkenazic legacy that continues to shape Jewish identity. In 1096, during the First Crusade, as thousands upon thousands of crusaders moved across Europe en route to the Holy Land, large numbers of Jews were killed in communities along the Rhine. What precisely happened continues to be debated by historians, but there is no doubt that among the victims were those who slaughtered their family members and themselves. Thus was born the reputation of Ashkenazic Jewry for *Kiddush ha-Shem*, the sanctification of the Name (of God), the forfeit of life for faith. This legacy is commemorated in the synagogue on Sabbath mornings, in the following prayer:

May the merciful Father who dwells on high, in his infinite mercy, remember those saintly, upright and blameless souls, the holy communities who offered their lives for the sanctification of the divine name. . . . They were swifter than eagles, braver than lions, in doing the will of their Master and the desire of their Rock. May our God remember them favorably among the righteous of the world; may he avenge the blood of his servants which has been shed.

The memory of the martyrdom of 1096 grips Jews more powerfully than ever in light of the Holocaust and of the lives laid down on behalf of the state of Israel. To the modern Jew, Ashkenazic martyrdom rep-

resents the never-ending struggle for Jewish survival, its awful cost in lives and suffering, and the heroic refusal to accept defeat, of the spirit if not the body.

The strength of the religious commitment implicit in the martyrdom of German Jewry is also partly responsible for this society's characterization as saintly, as absolutely faithful to Jewish law and subject to rabbinic authority. In this respect the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz might anachronistically be portrayed as the forerunners of today's ultra-Orthodox communities in B'nai Brak or Williamsburg; allegedly the rabbis held sway over the community, and observance of the law among the rank and file was punctilious and unswerving.

These characteristics mesh with, or perhaps dictate, the prevalent image of Jewish-Christian relations in the Franco-German communities of the Middle Ages. Although the livelihood of these Jews depended on their relations with Christian clients, accounts of medieval Ashkenaz in modern historiography generally present an image of mutual, unremitting hostility. The Christian side is seen as exerting constant conversionary pressure, which of course the Jews resist, and when, all too often, Christian animosity and persecution results in violence, the Jews bravely face death or expulsion rather than heed the call to convert.

This book revisits these themes in the hope of fashioning a more human image of Ashkenazic Jewry. Although it has been important for modern Jews to view the Middle Ages as an age of faith, in contrast to the secular culture of the modern world, the resultant dichotomy is an oversimplification. The conditions of medieval life were of course very different from those of the modern era; nonetheless I argue that medieval Ashkenaz was not a community of saints and martyrs but simply of people, with both the heroism and the foibles found in other eras and locales. Lowering Ashkenazic Jewry from its pedestal complicates the picture of the Middle Ages as an era of a purer religious life, and by implication it may grant strength to contemporary Jews as they face their own challenges to religious fidelity, for although one can admire saints and martyrs, it is difficult to identify with them.

"Image," the introductory chapter, sets the stage for the ensuing discussion by examining the portrayal of Ashkenazic Jewry in pre-modern and modern historiography. In this overview I do not include

the Hebrew narratives of the First Crusade, which are treated later at length, but rather focus on the image presented in other medieval and early modern works, such as Solomon ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah*. I then move to the writings of the first modern scholars of Jewish history, such as Heinrich Graetz, and from there to the leading historians of the twentieth century, especially Yitzhak Baer, Jacob Katz, and Salo Baron. In the chapter I explore the contribution of each age to the development of the memory of Ashkenaz, highlighting cultural forces that underpinned the perspective of thinkers in each period.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are about the First Crusade, which has dominated the historical memory of medieval Ashkenaz. The catastrophe of the First Crusade was of such enormity that scholars were forced to confront the question of its antecedents and possible adumbrations. Consequently, sketches of Jewish-Christian relations in Europe from 840 (after the Carolingians) to 1096 tend to present litanies of persecution, which combine to give an impression of "clouds on the horizons," portents of the devastating storm. In "Adumbrations" (Chapter 2) I study these events, which are mainly eleventh-century incidents, to show that the portents thesis does not hold water. This issue resonates deeply today, as Jews wrestle with a similar problem vis-à-vis the Holocaust. However, the historiographical importance of this revision is that it establishes a less fraught, more normal image of Jewish-Christian relations in place of one that recognizes only alienation and confrontation.

Studies of the First Crusade have uniformly portrayed the assailants as presenting the Jews with the choice of baptism or death. This element of choice has been responsible in large measure for the creation of an image of Ashkenazic Jewry as saintly. In "Martyrdom" (Chapter 3) I maintain that the element of choice is largely absent from the primary sources. Those in Latin provide few details, and thus the emphasis is on the Hebrew narratives. According to these documents, the Jews expected slaughter, with no option of conversion, and this is also what reportedly occurred. The Jews anticipated that their children might be baptized, rather than killed, but we read that this expectation was mistaken, for the murderers spared no one.

There are, however, two exceptional scenarios, in which some Jews were offered a choice: (1) those who met their attackers after hundreds

of fellow Jews were already killed and the crusaders' bloodlust satiated; and (2) when small groups of Jews and Christians, who were often acquainted, encountered each other in secluded locations, rather than in a mass, public context. Yet these two scenarios are the exception to the rule of death without a choice, which renders the mass suicides less heroic and therefore more human and in some sense more comprehensible.

Martyrdom, particularly mass suicide, is the focus of the twelfth-century Hebrew narratives of the First Crusade persecutions, which extol the lofty ideal of *Kiddush ha-Shem*. In "Survival" (Chapter 4) I illuminate an aspect of the narratives that has attracted little scholarly notice, namely, expressions of ambivalence about the martyrdom option or its outright rejection. I present evidence of unheroic conduct and of the separation of family members during the chaotic conflict. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of social pressure in the situations described in the Hebrew sources. I then devote a section to the conduct of young people in particular, whose behavior is singled out by the narrators. All these expressions of ambivalence present an image of Ashkenazic society that is heterogeneous and hence both credible and human.

The prevailing image of apostasy in medieval Ashkenaz posits that apostasy was rare; that the few apostates were almost all forcibly baptized, rather than true converts to Christianity; that the few, coerced, apostates were steadfast in their observance of the commandments and reverted to Judaism at the earliest opportunity; that in the eyes of his family and community, an apostate ceased to exist; and that ideological apostasy was more significant than venal apostasy. In "Apostates" (Chapter 5) I argue that coerced apostates did not necessarily outnumber voluntary ones and that the distinction was generally unimportant to medieval rabbis. Furthermore, even coerced apostates did not always revert, or did not necessarily do so promptly, and there was also the phenomenon of serial reversion, movement back and forth across the religious divide. And although there were those who apostatized because they became convinced of the truth of Christianity, there were also those whose apostasy was venal. These apostates hurdled the Jewish-Christian divide with ease, as if they did not consider it terribly significant. In brief, in this chapter I use apostates to challenge the image of the absolute fidelity of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry.

The Jews of Ashkenaz are generally portrayed as the halakhic society par excellence, utterly subservient to Jewish law and rabbinical authority, but in “Deviance” (Chapter 6) I offer abundant evidence to the contrary from a broad range of ritual behaviors. Women appear in many rabbinic sources as blithely contravening the law of the Talmud and, what is more, as refusing to respond to the efforts of rabbis to correct their behavior. This pattern is also found among men, who are depicted as equally intractable. The tosafists, leading rabbis of twelfth-century France and Germany, posited that nonhalakhic behavior must be based on some sort of halakhic rationale, which they labored to supply, but in “Deviance” I argue that nonhalakhic behavior should be accepted for what it is. Contrary to the prevailing image, the Jews of medieval Franco-Germany violated talmudic law and rabbinic dictate when they saw fit to do so, and the rabbis were painfully aware of the limits of their own authority.

The image of a pristine Ashkenazic society presents these Jews as culturally autonomous, as dwelling entirely within the four ells of their own tradition and lifestyle and conducting contact with gentiles almost exclusively within an economic context. In “Christians” (Chapter 7) I survey a number of realms in which the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz are seen to have been well integrated into the majority culture, both socially and culturally. The Jews of France and Germany, rather than leading a ghetto existence, were an integral—if marginal—component of European society, adopting and adapting Christian ideas and values into the fabric of their own civilization.

The large-scale collapse of Spanish Jewry in the wake of the 1391 riots and the missionary pressure of the early fifteenth century typically forms the backdrop to characterizations of Ashkenazic Jewry as faithful unto death to their religious identity and to the dictates of Jewish law. The regnant interpretation, championed above all by Yitzhak Baer, assigns responsibility for the Spanish breakdown to the sizable class of Jewish courtiers, affluent and well-connected Jewish government officials. Ostensibly, the education of the elite in “Greek wisdom,” namely philosophy and science, eroded their religious conviction. This factor combined with a natural reluctance to surrender positions of power, prestige, and comfort, to drive the courtiers to the baptismal font when the crisis arrived. Because these aristocrats were also leaders of the Jew-

ish community, their treachery demoralized the rank and file and resulted in mass apostasy.

In “Sepharad” (Chapter 8) I question the explanatory power of the courtiers’ Greek wisdom and hedonism and then challenge the basic Ashkenaz-Sepharad dichotomy. Broadly, the upshot of this discussion is that the gap between the Spanish and Franco-German communities is narrower than it has appeared. Both societies exhibit nonhalakhic behavior and apostasy, as well as martyrdom, and both engaged their Christian neighbors intensively in many areas of daily life. At the same time, there were real and important differences in the social and cultural characteristics of the Spanish and Franco-German communities, which limit the feasibility and utility of comparative analysis. When the nexus between Spanish deviance and Ashkenazic fidelity is sundered, a nuanced image of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry can finally take shape, one with scope for martyrs and apostates, piety and deviance, commitment to tradition and cultural integration.

Responsibility for the reconstruction of medieval Ashkenazic culture presented in the ensuing pages is my own. Nevertheless, that reconstruction did not spring from my mind *ex nihilo*, but rather built on the scholarship of many colleagues over the past few decades, whose achievements I gratefully acknowledge. A glance at the notes to this book will make apparent my debt to David Berger, Robert Chazan, Jeremy Cohen, Avraham Grossman, Ephraim Kanarfogel, Ivan Marcus, Haym Soloveitchik, Kenneth Stow, Israel Ta-Shma, and Israel Yuval. Many of these esteemed colleagues offered much needed encouragement in the early stages of my involvement in this particular arena of scholarly discourse, for which I am also deeply appreciative.

I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Department of Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University for their support and encouragement, particularly Gershon Bacon, Elisheva Baumgarten, Shmuel Feiner, Elliott S. Horowitz, Kimmy Kaplan, Moises Orfali, Moshe Rosman, Adi Shremer, and Ariel Toaff. I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of my friend Moshe Benovitz, who suggested the title. Thanks are also due to those who read and commented on individual chapters or the entire manuscript and particularly to my long-time colleague and friend, Abraham Gross of Ben-Gurion University. I am also thankful to

the highly skilled and conscientious staff of Stanford University Press, including Norris Pope and Carolyn Brown, and copyeditor Mimi Braverman. I gratefully acknowledge the Taube Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford University for its grant in aid of publication.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Brenda, with thanks for all the gifts she has given me, and especially for her ability to read texts sensitively, a talent she has demonstrated throughout our married life.