

LESSON OUTLINE

Download the HERITAGE DVD-ROM bookmarks for this lesson:

For Windows users

For Macintosh users

The Early Ashkenazic Experience in Europe

- V** Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, Feudal Society, Part 1
- V** Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, Feudal Society, Part 2 (Bookmarked as "Rashi")
- V** Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, Church vs. Jews

Rashi and the Crusades

- A** Atlas: Mediterranean: 1096
- V** Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, First Crusade
- A** Atlas: France: 1096
- D** Historical Document: Rashi on Forced Converts

Christian Anti-Judaism

- V** Video: Show 4: Europe Awakens, Hostility Toward Jews
- M** Multimedia: Hostility Toward Jews
 - > The Jewish Badge
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Expulsions, The Black Death, and Migration to the East

- V** Video: Show 4: Social Upheaval, Expulsions of Jews

HERITAGE

Civilization and the Jews

§ The Crucible of Europe §

Session 8

Episode 4 § Lesson 2

Medieval Judaism in Christian Europe

The Jewish community in feudal Europe was largely centered in the Rhine Valley and the nearby Champagne region of France. Jews formed the mercantile class there, and Jewish trade routes to the resources and products of Islamic lands were crucial in developing these European Christian lands.

As Jews established themselves in western Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, protective charters were issued by local rulers eager for the benefits that Jewish traders and financiers could offer.

Jews helped settle the untamed lands, creating a vibrant Ashkenazic Jewish cultural and religious world. One of these learned Ashkenazim, a vignier named Solomon ben Isaac – or, as he is better known, Rashi – created commentaries on the Bible and Talmud that remain definitive to our day. But life for Rashi and his Jewish community was tenuous, and the First Crusade at the end of the eleventh century brought widespread Christian destruction to the young French/German Ashkenazic Jewish society.

Christian anti-Judaism, which combined theological, economic, and superstitious antagonisms, was a potent force in decimating these early Ashkenazic communities. Widespread slaughters and forced conversions in Jewish towns were coupled with anti-Jewish legislation. Quite-literal witch-hunts added to the precariousness of Jewish

- A Atlas: Europe: 1348**
- V Video: Show 4: Black Death, The Bubonic Plague**
- V Video: Show 4: Black Death, Jews Attacked**
- D Historical Document: Law Grants Jews Rights in Poland**

existence in Christian Europe. In many areas, Jews were expelled for theological and economic reasons.

With the tragedy of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, massive genocidal Christian impulses emerged against the centuries-old European Jewish population. Although a steady stream of Ashkenazim had migrated earlier to the great untamed lands in the east – today’s Poland, Russia, and Baltic States – the stream became a torrent as the wholesale persecutions and expulsions of western European Jews proceeded without inhibition.

PART 1

The Early Ashkenazic Experience in Europe

The early Middle Ages saw a Europe that was barely clinging to the cultural vestiges of the extinct Roman Empire.

Christianized in earlier centuries, Europe had little political organization – and, indeed, little civilization to compare with what Islam had created elsewhere. A network of shifting local political allegiances rarely displayed the stable organization that is characteristic of nations.

In northern and western Europe, such social and political unity and continuity as existed was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. This situation made the Jews ultimate-outsiders amidst the Christian populace, and made the Jewish populace extremely vulnerable.

Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, Feudal Society

Jews had previously been present in the Roman frontier areas in France and the Rhine Valley, but as Europe began to develop in the tenth century, Jewish merchants, traders and financiers settled in, and contributed to, the evolution of the continent.

◆ Play this video segment until “...home for the Jews.”

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why was northern Europe such a backward and disunited place?
- What assets did the Jews have as traders that enabled them to find a place in the social and economic fabric of medieval Europe?

Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, Feudal Society

The Jews functioned as a critical merchant class, linking northern Europe with the economically vigorous Islamic lands to the south. Because of the economic benefits bestowed by the Jews, the local rulers sought out Jews to inhabit their realms. The Jewish communities that formed boasted great scholars, and the greatest of these was Rashi (1040-1105).

In addition to his prolific commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, Rashi and his colleagues at the great academies helped to define the distinctive religious concepts and observances of Ashkenazic Judaism.

V Northern Europe, Feudal Society, Part 1

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Northern Europe > Feudal Society

V Northern Europe, Feudal Society, Part 2

Bookmark: “Rashi”

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Northern Europe > Jewish Life

V Northern Europe, Church vs. Jews

Video > The Crucible of Europe >
Northern Europe > Church vs. Jews

- ◆ Play this video segment until “....land in the distant north mentioned in the Bible.”

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why did the Judaism of the Ashkenazim develop in distinctive ways relative to the Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews?
- Is it more surprising that there are differences in the Judaisms of different areas than it would be if a single homogeneous Judaism had developed? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, Church vs. Jews

The Church was highly antagonistic to the Jews, and civil leaders viewed their Jewish populations with mixed emotions. Jews were useful for the economic wellbeing of the realm but were often resented for their economic role. The Church held the Jews responsible for deicide, and seemed also to have concerns about the attraction of Judaism for some of the citizenry of Christian Europe. By the late 11th century, there is evidence, in European art and literature, of a popular brand of anti-Semitism, fueled by the Church and widely adopted by the Christian populace.

- ◆ Play this video segment until “....religion was the critical ingredient.”

Review and Discussion Questions

- Contrast the bases of identity in America with those of medieval Christian Europe.
- How did the “insolence of the masses” get excited by Church sermonizing on the role of the Jews in the death of Jesus?
- In many ways, the Jews were thrust into their crucial economic role in medieval Europe. Is there a way for this phenomenon to *not* incite the resentment of the host community?

PART 2

Rashi and the Crusades

Rashi, whom we met earlier, was a leader of the Jews in Troyes, a city in eastern France, and in the Rhine Valley in Germany, where he had studied and taught.

When Pope Urban called for a great Christian Crusade to liberate the holy city of Jerusalem from its Islamic rulers, he unleashed a populist movement that would have terrible repercussions for European Jewry. The Crusader rabble-armies turned their militaristic religious zeal on the despised non-Christians (i.e., Jews) in their home communities and on the line of march to the Holy Land. Jewish communities were horribly persecuted, particularly in the Rhine Valley.

Often, local rulers and bishops would try to protect their Jewish populaces (as well as they could) from the marauding Crusader armies: in Troyes, Rashi's cordial relationships with the Christian authorities gave protection to his community, but just to the east in the Germanic lands, Jews were massacred or forced to convert to Christianity en masse.

A Mediterranean: 1096

Atlas > 732 CE – 1492 CE > 1096 > Mediterranean

Atlas: Mediterranean: 1096

The Jews lived in the heartland of medieval Europe: France, Alsace and the Rhine Valley. The line of march of the Crusaders went right through the communities of the Jews.

- ◆ Point out Jerusalem (in the lower-right corner of the map) and the Rhine Valley (the great Jewish communities of Mainz, Worms and Troyes) toward the upper left.
- ◆ Zoom in near the words **Holy Roman Empire**, and show how the path for northern European crusaders would lead through the Rhine Valley to reach the Mediterranean (point out Venice at the center-bottom of the map) and to continue eastward to the Holy Land.

Review and Discussion Question

- Why would the Rhine Valley have been a good route for the Crusaders to take in forming and moving their armies toward Jerusalem?

V Northern Europe, First Crusade

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Northern Europe > First Crusade

Video: Show 4: Northern Europe, First Crusade

The Papal call for the liberation of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Islam inspired a religiously infused and militaristic response from the European populace. Since the area's Jews

A France: 1096

Atlas > 732 CE- 1492 CE > 1096 >
Europe

D Rashi on Forced Converts

Video > The Crucible of Europe >
Northern Europe > Jewish Life >
Historical Documents > A
Responsum about Forced Converts

were the only local population that was non-Christian, the rabble who attached themselves to the Crusades went on horrific rampages against Jewish communities, almost as a trial run for the ultimate battle against the Muslim occupiers of Palestine. Mass murders and forced Jewish conversion to Christianity became widespread phenomena, to the seeming dismay of the Church hierarchy that had initiated the First Crusade.

- ◆ Play this video segment until "...but most refused."

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why did the Christian Crusaders assault Jewish communities?
- How did the local Church leadership most often respond?

Atlas: France: 1096

Rashi, in his late fifties at the time of First Crusade, was the acknowledged leader of the Troyes Jewish community. Thanks to his diplomatic relations with both the local rulers of the Champagne district, and his cordial relations with the bishop of Troyes, his community was spared the awful fates of their nearby sister communities in Germany.

- ◆ Point out Troyes on the map (just to the left of the word "Holy" [Roman Empire]).
- ◆ Point out Speyer to the east and further north, near Worms. Mention that this was the city where Rudiger had earlier extended a protective charter, and that it was mentioned earlier also as the first site of an anti-Semitic massacre at the start of the Crusades. (It was also the filming-site for the video just viewed.)
- ◆ Point out also nearby Metz and Rouen, where forced conversion of Jews was rampant.

Review and Discussion Questions

- How is Rashi's cultivation of the pertinent rulers around Troyes echoed in the policies of modern Jewish organizations and leaders?

Historical Document: Rashi on Forced Converts

After the gross excesses of the launching of the First Crusade were finished, thousands of the surviving Jews were forced converts to Christianity. In Hebrew, they are known as the *anusim*. Their standing as Jews within the Jewish community – indeed within their own families – was a matter of controversy. In his advanced years, Rashi became the leading judge of religious and civil cases involving the *anusim*.

- ◆ Read the responsum.

Review and Discussion Questions

- What was the criterion that Rashi placed on the case for its disposition?
- How would you evaluate the wisdom and/or the liberality of Rashi's finding?

PART 3

Christian Anti-Semitism

We have already seen the hostility of the Church to the Jews, manifested in theological antagonism, populist violence, and the depredations of the Crusades. Even after the chastening experience of the First Crusade, the Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries propagated anti-Jewish policies.

Initially, the secular rulers found great value in their Jewish citizenries. But a variety of economic circumstances, including large debts owed to Jews and popular resentments that needed to be assuaged, turned the civil rulers into allies of the Church in anti-Jewish policies. This alliance was to have lethal consequences across western Europe.

V Europe Awakens, Hostility Toward Jews

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Europe Awakens > Hostility Towards Jews

Video: Show 4: Europe Awakens, Hostility Toward Jews

The early 1200s saw aggressive anti-Semitic decrees against the Jews of western Europe. Not only were the People of the Book personally targeted, but the books from which they drew their identity were, remarkably, assaulted as well.

- ◆ Play this video segment until "...brought to their realm."

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why were Jews required to wear distinctive clothes?
- Why did the Church authorities in France and elsewhere target the Talmud? Why not Tanakh?
- Why were the civil rulers of Europe reluctant to join in the Church's anti-Jewish policies in this period?

Multimedia: Hostility Toward Jews

The anti-Judaism that pervaded northern and western Europe was expressed in both legislation adversely affecting Jews, and the legends and superstitions purveyed against them, largely from the pulpits and the writings of Church officials.

The Jewish Badge

The Jewish badge has been noted in the video. But systematic attempts to marginalize the Jews of Europe through distinct dress were even more pervasive.

- ◆ Click the **Media Presentations** button.
- ◆ Then, click the **Jewish Badge** button to play the Autoplay.

M The Jewish Badge

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Europe Awakens > Hostility Towards Jews > Explore Topic > Media Presentation > The Jewish Badge

M Anti-Jewish Stereotypes

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Europe Awakens > Hostility Towards Jews > Media Presentation > Anti-Jewish Stereotypes

V Europe Awakens, Rise of Commerce

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Europe Awakens > The Rise of Commerce

Review and Discussion Question

- The Jewish badge was imposed, while the Jewish hat was a common piece of Jewish dress that was made legally mandatory. What are the differences in the impositions of these two elements on Jewish garb by the Church?

Anti-Jewish Stereotypes

Along with the dress-edicts which physically isolated the Jews from Christians, a broad range of demonizing superstitions were circulated about the Jews.

- ◆ Click the button **Anti-Jewish Stereotypes**.
- ◆ Using the page-selector at the bottom of the first graphic that is displayed, discuss these tales about the Jews, summarizing or reading the sidebar data:
 - **Moneylending and Usury** – Note the pawn-shop activity depicted.
 - **The Jew as Devil** – Why is the Jew turned diabolical?
 - **Desecration of the Host** – Note the actual blood from the host.
 - **The Blood Libel** – Sixteenth century “Saint Simon” of Trent is the alleged victim in this grisly depiction.

Review and Discussion Questions

- Which of these elements had a grain of real-world truth in it?
- To Jews, the Catholic “host” is obviously not invested with any Christological meaning. Why would Catholics believe that Jews would desecrate it?
- In Judaism, any consumption of blood is taboo. How could the blood libel have arisen?

Video: Show 4: Europe Awakens, Rise of Commerce

We have seen the anti-Jewish stereotype of the Jew-as-moneylender. This was certainly based on reality, as the Jews had, especially since the twelfth century, established themselves as a crucial source of capital for the economic expansion of western Europe.

- ◆ Play this video segment until “...money for investment.”

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why were Jews cultivated by local rulers for money-lending?
- Restrictive legislation made many professions and real-estate transactions impossible for Jews. To what extent would this have affected their choice of banking as a vocation?

V Social Upheaval, Taxation and Rebellion

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Social Upheaval > Taxation & Rebellion

Video: Show 4: Social Upheaval, Taxation and Rebellion

As rulers raised taxes to finance domestic and foreign exploits, the Jews' profits from money-lending became a major source of the nobles' revenues. When popular resentment of taxes and indirect taxes (through increased money-lending rates) reached high intensity, the rulers found that popular unrest could be re-directed entirely at the Jews. Noble-sponsored massacres resulted, and Christian debts to Jews became, of course, uncollectible.

- ◆ Play this video segment until "...could not be contained."

Review and Discussion Question

- How did the anti-Jewish stereotypes contribute to the violence against the unfortunate Jews at York and other places?

PART 4

Expulsions, The Black Death, and Migration to the East

The violent religious and economic antagonism of the Church, the nobility and the populace to the Jews resulted in an orgy of anti-Jewish propaganda through the thirteenth and into the fourteenth century. Eventually, many areas completely expelled their Jewish populations, often re-admitting them when the need for financial capital again asserted itself.

Many expelled Jews, lacking secure places to re-settle in northern and western Europe, moved to the frontier regions of central and eastern Europe. The pent-up anti-Jewish resentments exploded in the middle of the fourteenth century when the Black Death decimated Europe. The massacres of the Jews at this time precipitated a mass Jewish movement by the end of the fourteenth century toward the east, shifting the center of Ashkenazi life to Poland, Lithuania, and other eastern frontier lands.

V Social Upheaval, Expulsions of Jews

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Social Upheaval > Expulsion of Jews

Video: Show 4: Social Upheaval, Expulsions of Jews

Rulers got all the economic benefit they could from the Jews and then – faced with popular unrest and resentment – expelled them, always seizing their assets and negating the debts owed to them. England was the first to do this, and then rulers across western Europe followed the British model in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

◆ Play this video segment until “...but in great insecurity.”

Review and Discussion Questions

- Summarize the economic sequence that resulted in Jewish expulsions.
- Why were Jews in Germany somewhat more secure than those in the developed monarchies of England and France?

A Europe, 1348

Atlas > 732 CE- 1492 CE > 1348 > Europe

Atlas: Europe, 1348

The Black Death arrived in the middle of the fourteenth century and was merciless in its decimation of the mostly Christian European populace. Jews remaining in western Europe were largely concentrated in western Germany, having been expelled from England and France.

◆ Point out the area of Germany, and click on one or more the following **clickable items** (or summarize the information in

V Black Death, The Bubonic Plague

Video > The Crucible of Europe >
Black Death > The Bubonic Plague

V Black Death, Jews Attacked

Video > The Crucible of Europe >
Black Death > Jews Attacked

the information panels) to illustrate the breadth of the anti-Jewish violence in the wake of the Black Death:

- > **Strasbourg**
- > **Cologne**
- > **Basel**
- > **Vienna**

Video: Show 4: Black Death, The Bubonic Plague

The origins of the Black Death are difficult to ascertain, but it was clearly the Bubonic Plague, and was propagated by rats and unsanitary conditions in an era that had no notion of microbial infections. Seeking an explanation for the devastation of its populace, Christian Europeans started rumors that the despised Jews had poisoned the Christians' wells.

The resulting slaughters of entire Jewish communities were actually just an intensified manifestation of the religious and economic demonization of Jews that had accelerated in the preceding centuries.

- ◆ Play this video segment until "...the most destructive of all."

Review and Discussion Questions

- What stories might Christians have heard to lead them to believe that the Jews were responsible for the Black Death?
- Faced with this sustained outbreak of genocidal rage in most of the significant cities in Europe, and under expulsion edicts elsewhere, what choices did the Jews have for survival?

Video: Show 4: Black Death, Jews Attacked

The Jews had little choice but to flee the hatred, death, and destruction of medieval western and central Europe. While scattered Jewish communities would precariously remain in the Germanic lands, a wholesale exodus to the frontier areas of eastern Europe ensued, and these lands' opportunities for development and growth were a magnet for persecuted Ashkenazim. A new chapter for Ashkenazic Judaism was being written in eastern Europe and Russia.

- ◆ Play this video segment until "...would be built."

Review and Discussion Questions

- Why would Poland and the other areas in the east have been attractive to the migrating Ashkenazim, who were seeking refuge?
- Why would the rulers of these eastern European areas have welcomed the influx of Jews to their realms?

D Law Grants Jews Rights in Poland

Video > The Crucible of Europe > Black Death > Refuge in the East > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > Law Grants Jews Rights in Poland

Historical Document: Law Grants Jews Rights in Poland

Jews were welcomed into these frontier areas in order to use their financial and management skills in developing and administering large tracts of untamed land. Charters were granted to these Jews by the Polish and Lithuanian noblemen, placing the Jewish communities under royal protection against persecution.

- ◆ Summarize the sidebar information.
- ◆ Read the text of the document, noting the papal endorsement and the acknowledgment of the spurious nature of blood-libels.

Review and Discussion Questions

- What do you think about the provision of retribution on false-accusers of the Jews regarding the blood-libel?
- What does the final paragraph imply about the situation of Jews in the lands from which they had come?

Pointers to the Next Session:

Over the next three centuries, the Ashkenazim would build a vibrant culture in the vast expanses of eastern Europe, developing social, communal, linguistic, and religious forms that would continue into the modern period. But those three centuries would end with a trauma comparable to the Black Death which had all but extinguished western Europe's Jewish communities.

In the meantime, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the expelled Sephardim from Spain would settle in and create their own vibrant communities throughout the Ottoman Empire - including in the land of Palestine - and would take advantage of the Protestant Reformation and Renaissance humanism to establish very different but thriving Jewish communities again in northern and western Europe.

As Catholic/Protestant religious wars wracked Europe, some of these Sephardim would also participate in the settlement of new European empires in the western hemisphere.