A 1096 Complex? Constructing the First Crusade in Jewish Historical Memory, Medieval and Modern

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> Let the ears hearing this and its like be seared; for who has heard or seen the likes of it? Inquire and seek: Was there ever such a mass sacrificial offering (*Aqedah*) since the time of Adam . . . ? On a single day . . . one thousand one hundred holy souls were killed and slaughtered, babes and sucklings who had not sinned or transgressed, the souls of poor innocent people. . . . That day the diadem of Israel fell, the students of the Torah fell, and the outstanding scholars passed away. . . . Gone were the sin-fearers, gone were the men of virtuous deed; ended were the radiance of wisdom and purity and abstinence, the glory of the priesthood and the men of perfect faith; diminished were the ranks of those who give charity in secret. Gone was truth; gone were the explicators of the Word and the Law; fallen were the people of eminence and the sage—all on this day, on which so many sorrows befell us. . . . Since the day on which the Second Temple was destroyed, their like had not arisen, *nor shall there be their like again*—for they sanctified and bore witness to the unity of God's name with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their might.[1]

Thus the twelfth-century Hebrew chronicler recalled how nine hundred years ago, at the end of the spring and beginning of the summer of

1096—during the earliest months of the First Crusade—bands of armed crusaders attacked Jewish settlements in western and central Germany; those Jews whom they could the crusaders converted, while others who fell in their path they killed. Jewish communities of the Rhine valley—in Speyer, Worms, Mainz, Cologne and its suburbs, Metz, and Trier—and others, including Regensburg and Prague to the east, suffered serious losses in life and property upon this, the first widespread outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in medieval Christian Europe.

When compelled by their attackers to choose between conversion to Christianity and death, the Jews of Ashkenaz compounded the novelty and singularity of the events of 1096 in no less striking a fashion: To be sure, there evidently were attempts to flee the crusaders, to bribe them, to seek refuge with the local potentates, to flee altogether, and even to take up arms. A significant number opted for baptism, although many of these—very probably most of them—returned to Jewish life within several years of the violence. Yet many others, perhaps a majority of those attacked in 1096, elected to die a martyr's death; and of these, very many took their own lives and those of their loved ones in order to avoid capture, torture, forced conversion, and/or death at the hands of the enemy. In such rampant willingness to forfeit life *ʿal qiddush ha-Shem* (in sanctification of God's name, as they put it) and, perhaps, in violation of rabbinic strictures against suicide, many students of Jewish history have beheld a distinctive hallmark of medieval Ashkenazic Jewish culture, one which contrasts sharply with the frequent preference of Sefardic/Spanish Jewry for conversion (to Christianity or Islam) in the face of religious persecution.

Equally novel are the Jewish documents which narrate the events of these persecutions in general and numerous scenes of such self-inflicted martyrdom in particular. For centuries the ancestors of these Ashkenazic Jews had recalled and lamented moments of national tragedy in liturgical poetry (*piyyut*), and an impressive number of extant *piyyutim* bemoan the suffering and casualties of 1096.[2] Alongside poetic laments of this sort, however, three Hebrew chronicles of the First Crusade survive, among the earliest instances of local Jewish historiography in medieval Europe.[3] Apart from Abraham ibn Daud's *Sefer ha- Qabbalah*, the Hebrew crusade chronicles are often considered the sole examples of genuinely historical literature produced by medieval Jews, and they have

figured centrally in academic debate concerning the ahistorical consciousness of medieval Jewish civilization.[4]

In the twelfth century and again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these novel dimensions to the persecutions of 1096 contributed to their singular prominence in Jewish historical memory. Our twelfth-century Hebrew chronicler committed his story to writing out of the conviction that exilic Jewry had neither suffered nor valiantly withstood the trials of suffering as the Jews of Mainz did in 1096; for Solomon bar Samson, the chronicler, not only did they outshine those who had preceded them, but never "shall there be their like again." Following the lead of their medieval predecessors, modern historians of medieval Jews have commonly viewed the persecutions of 1096 as a critical turning point in medieval Jewish history:[5] Until the First Crusade, runs this argument, Jews fared relatively well in the Latin West, living alongside their Christian neighbors with minimal interference from church or state, the targets of physical persecution in only a few, isolated instances; after the violence of 1096, however, the status of medieval Jews declined steadily. Massacres of Jews in the name of Christian piety revealed the inadequacy of existing safeguards for the person and property of the Jew. His need for greater protection enhanced his dependence on, and weakness before, Christian princes, without whose goodwill he remained at the mercy of an increasingly hostile European society; at the same time, the physical persecution of the Jews, albeit technically illegal, awakened Latin Christendom to their anomalous situation. Why were the enemies of Christ permitted to remain and to thrive within the domains of Christianity, far beyond the limits dictated by Christian legislators and theologians of old? Churchmen and jurists responded by repeatedly reevaluating the Jews, their Judaism, and their contemporary situation during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by the end of which period a constellation of principled and practical considerations induced the political rulers of medieval Europe to begin expelling Jews from their lands. In the wake of 1096, Israeli historian Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson has concluded, "the Jews now realized that charters alone could not provide absolute security against mob fury. Christian religious fervor had kindled a fire in the tents of Jacob and had led to slaughter in his habitations. The blood of the Jews had, as it were, been made free for the Christian masses. In respect to legal formulations, security and

possibilities of livelihood, the First Crusade inaugurated a new and harsh epoch for Jews in Christian lands."[6] And in his oft-reprinted and translated survey of Jewish history, Cecil Roth offered a still more definitive appraisal:

> The effects of the Crusades upon the Jew . . . the passions and the tendencies which they set in motion continued to dominate his history for at least four centuries, and left traces upon it which are discernible even today. They influenced his political position, his geographical distribution, his economic activity, his forms of literary expression, even his spiritual life. It may be added that, in almost every direction, the influence was for the bad. Take any realistic description of the position of world Jewry down to the close of the last century; take any indictment drawn up by an anti-Semite in our own times; take any contemporary analysis of the weakness of the Jewish position or the alleged shortcomings of the Jewish character; and in almost every instance it will be possible to trace the origin, if not actually to the crusades, to the currents which they stirred.[7]

Various investigators have endeavored to modify or to refute this notion that the persecutions of 1096 constituted a virtual watershed in medieval European Jewish history, but only a few have sought to understand the basis for the theory and its popularity in modern scholarship. We have before us a historiographical tradition that has repeatedly, in varying contexts and modes since 1096, edited, reformulated, and reoriented current memories of the persecutions in response to the changing needs and temperament of the prevailing Jewish culture. Not all the links in this tradition are known to us; especially in the medieval period, many agents of historical memory—or "phantoms of remembrance," as Patrick Geary has recently dubbed them—remain highly elusive.[8] I therefore propose a new examination of several stages in the development of this tradition, the first of them medieval, the remainder more recent.

First, however much we might like to use the twelfth-century Hebrew chronicles to document what actually transpired in the Rhineland in 1096, I have argued the contrary in several previous papers. I can only summarize my argument here:[9] that their narratives of the events—and

the phenomenon of self-inflicted martyrdom above all—elucidate the perspective of those Jews who survived much more than they explain the behavior of those who died. On the one hand, these chronicles empowered Ashkenazic Jews of the early twelfth century to respond in kind, not to the knights of the crusade, but to the polemical overtones of crusading ideology, which, Jonathan Riley-Smith has shown, matured only in the twelfth-century Christian chronicles of the First Crusade.[10] Quite simply, the Jewish chroniclers' message read: Our martyrdom, the atonement it effected, and the salvation it secured were genuine; yours are not. Our martyrs surpass your martyrs, even your Martyr *par excellence*. Our holy war, in which we readily died as martyrs, was greater, more meritorious, than yours. We must recall, on the other hand, that Jews who survived the persecutions of 1096 generally did so by converting to Christianity, which most abandoned once the violence had subsided. Imagine the guilt that must have plagued the communities of these survivors and their children when contrasting their survival with the martyrdom of their brethren. *Their* memories imbue the chronicles, and it should not surprise us that such memories project the survivor's conflicts and doubts onto the martyr, helping to resolve the dissonance between the ostensive weakness of the former and heroism of the latter.

The persecutions of 1096 received but scanty attention in Jewish historical literature of the late medieval and early modern periods, and the second phase in our story brings us to the nineteenth century. Arguing that reliable historical evidence concerning the massacres and their lasting impact upon Ashkenazic communities does not justify the portrayal of 1096 as a watershed in Jewish history, Simon Schwarzfuchs has recently characterized that portrayal as the creature of Jewish historiography in nineteenth-century Germany. Romanticism then conditioned European historical thought, and the "charms of the East and the birth of colonialism" sparked renewed interest in the crusades. Products of the *Haskalah* or modern Jewish enlightenment, and wedded to the philological program of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (their movement of the Science of Judaism) for rehabilitating Judaism in modern European society, medieval Jewish historians of the time confronted a serious problem: Precious little material offered documentation of Jewish life in medieval Europe, such that the history of medieval Jewry became chiefly a literary history, which seemed to predominate over any other concern.