The Medieval Period – 5th-15th Centuries: Anti-Semitism moves from words to actions

The middle Ages is the historical period that followed the Iron Age, beginning in the 5th century and lasting until around the 15th century. Theological Christian anti-Judaism coupled with pagan anti-Semitism would prove to be an explosive mix for the Jewish communities of Europe.

Laws and codes are compiled into volumes such as the Theodosian Code (313-453) or Justinian Code (534), both very damaging to the Jewish people. Popes and Bishops succeed one another only to make Jewish communal life increasingly difficult.

Anti-Judaism in theory became anti-Semitism in practice and Jewish history continues to be written with blood and tears.

- Forced Baptisms and Conversion become the norm.
- Looting of Jewish villages takes place and property is confiscated
- Jews become oppressed by both Church and State
- Jews are forced to listen to Christian sermons
- Jews are forbidden to keep the Mosaic Law
- Jews can no longer hold public office
- Jews can no longer own slaves
- Jews cannot travel without a permit

For the most part, the medieval period was a very dark and difficult time for the Jewish people. Although they was some respite during the Carolingian Dynasty (700s to the 1100s), Jewish life even improved a bit
under Charlemagne (742-814) as Jewish people were included in
Charlemagne’s entourage and they were well treated. He found no difficulties
in preserving the growth and well being of Christianity while maintaining a
decent relationship with the Jewish community of his kingdom.

It is also at this time in history that two major Jewish figures came
onto the scene. Those two major rabbis were Rambam and Rashi.
Moses ben-Maimon, or Maimonides, also known by the acronym Rambam for
"Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon", was a famous medieval Jewish philosopher and
one of the greatest Torah scholars and physicians of the Middle Ages.
Rambam was born in Cordoba, Spain in 1135, and died in Egypt in 1204. He
was a rabbi, physician and philosopher.

He published a fourteen-volume body of work known as “Mishneh
Torah” (meaning repetition of the Torah), that continues to carry authority as
a codification of Talmudic law. He also produced The Guide to the Perplexed
to elucidate the Torah. According to him, he wrote it "to promote the true
understanding of the real spirit of the Law, to guide those religious persons
who, adhering to the Torah, have studied philosophy and are embarrassed by
the contradictions between the teachings of philosophy and the literal sense of
the Torah,”

Rambam is also remembered for having contributed his famous 13
principle of faith to the Jewish community of his time, and even though they
were first criticized by many, they eventually became widely accepted and
are still considered the cornerstone of Jewish religious life today around the
Jewish world. About Moses Maimonides, it is said: From Moses to Moses
there were none like Moses.
13 PRINCIPLES OF FAITH BY MOSES MAIMONIDES:

1. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the Creator and Guide of everything that has been created; He alone has made, does make, and will make all things.

2. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is One, and that there is no unity in any manner like His, and that He alone is our God, who was, and is, and will be.

3. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, has no body, and that He is free from all the properties of matter, and that there can be no (physical) comparison to Him whatsoever.

4. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the first and the last.

5. I believe with perfect faith that to the Creator, Blessed be His Name, and to Him alone, it is right to pray, and that it is not right to pray to any being besides Him.

6. I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true.

7. I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, was true, and that he was the chief of the prophets, both those who preceded him and those who followed him.

8. I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that is now in our possession is the same that was given to Moses our teacher, peace be upon him.

9. I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be exchanged, and that there will never be any other Torah from the Creator, Blessed be His Name.

10. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, knows all the deeds of human beings and all their thoughts, as it is written, "Who fashioned the hearts of them all, Who comprehends all their actions" (Psalms 33:15).

11. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, rewards those who keep His commandments and punishes those that transgress them.

12. I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and even though he may tarry, nonetheless, I wait every day for his coming.

13. I believe with perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the time when it shall please the Creator, Blessed be His name, and His mention shall be exalted forever and ever.
Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040 – 1105), also known by the acronym Rashi or RA bbi SH lomo Itzhaki), was a medieval French rabbi famous for the first comprehensive commentary on the Talmud, as well as a very thorough commentary on the Tenach (Jewish Bible).

Within worldwide Judaism, he is considered to be the foremost commentator, so much so that no religious Jews today would consider studying Torah or Talmud without his commentaries. They are included in every edition of the Talmud since 1520. His approach was one of a literal basic interpretation of the original text known as Peshat.

Both Rashi and Rambam were influential within the Jewish community during the Crusades as they were involved in trying to counteract Jewish conversion to Christianity.

For the Jewish people, aside from the Holocaust, it is very difficult to find a year more fateful than 1096, the year of the First Crusade. Some of the most violent and bloody massacres in Jewish history are about to take place and some of the most indelible marks in the history of the Church.

**The Crusades: “Kill a Jew Save your soul!”**

1096 is the year of the first Crusade (Rashi was 56 and in the prime of his writing years). The sudden outburst of violence against the Jewish communities of Europe at the hands nobles, knights, monks and peasants alike, came as a surprise. The official purpose of the Crusades was to push the Muslim infidels out of the Holy Land. The outcome greatly departed from the original call.

Both Christian knights and peasants joined forces in the first Crusade, under the Christian banner and with the new motto: “God wills it”. They departed from France and Germany, on their way to the Holy Land. It was not long before the Crusaders realized that they could start fighting the “infidels” by practicing in their own backyards, lead by “people’s Crusade leader” Peter the Hermit.

As the Crusaders marched through France and Germany on their way to Jerusalem, a motto was born: **“Kill a Jew, Save your soul!”**. The fate of thousands of
Jews was thus sealed with the Crusaders’ new motto. There were a total of 8 Crusades from 1096 to 1270. As a result, the term "Crusade" will never have a positive connotation in the Jewish mind.

Many Jewish people preferred suicide to forced conversion or inflicted death. They performed what is known as “Kiddush Hashem” or “sanctification of the name [of God]”. A Jewish practice as expressed in the Torah for any Jew: “To sanctify His Name” Leviticus 22:32, and conversely not to bring dishonor or shame to God’s name which is known as “Chillul Hashem” “Not to profane His Name” Lev. 22:32.

Lev. 21:6 ‘They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God, for they present the offerings by fire to the LORD, the bread of their God; so they shall be holy.
Lev. 22:2 “Tell Aaron and his sons to be careful with the holy gifts of the sons of Israel, which they dedicate to Me, so as not to profane My holy name; I am the LORD.
Lev. 22:31 “ So you shall keep My commandments, and do them: I am the LORD.
Lev. 22:32 “And you shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel: I am the LORD who sanctifies you,

The ultimate act of Kiddush Hashem is when a Jewish person is willing to sacrifice his/her life rather than transgress any of God’s three cardinal sins: Serving, committing certain sexual acts or committing murder. Jews have chosen this outcome in critical situations throughout their tragic history (Crusades, Inquisition, Holocaust).

The Jewish martyrs of 1096 who committed Kiddush Hashem became heroes in the synagogue and their remembrance also became part of the service.

The Spanish Inquisition

By 1479, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain had succeeded in uniting the two kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and it gave them hope of a unified

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1 http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejed_0002_0012_0_11109.html
Christian Spain as well. Isabella’s Dominican confessor, Thomas Torquemada immediately pushed for a re-establishment (previously running in the 1300s) of the Inquisition (under secular control this time).

In 1483, Torquemada was appointed Inquisitor General. For years to come, marranos\(^2\) (Jewish people who secretly practiced Judaism after forced conversions to Christianity) and all Spanish Jews lived in a constant state of terror.

The decree was issued in 1492 for all Jews to leave Spain within 6 months. Chief Rabbi and Spain’s tax collector Abraham Senior is said to have offered a large sum to King Ferdinand who was known for his love of money. Torquemada entered the scene with a cross, telling the King:

“Judas Iscariot sold Messiah for thirty pieces of silver; will your Highness sell him for 300,000 ducats? Here He is, take Him and sell Him!”

The King eventually held fast to his decree and 300,000 Jews had to leave. Most of them went to Italy, Turkey and Portugal only to eventually lead to the Portuguese Inquisition of a new community of marranos.

By the end of the 15\(^{th}\) century, the Jew has become an undesirable agent of Satan. The terms “Jewish” and “diabolical” were now synonymous. To Jews of course, the symbol of the cross, so dear to Christians, had become such an offense and became known as “the symbol of disaster”. Medieval anti-Semitism left a mark that the 21\(^{st}\) century is still trying to erase.

**The First Ghetto: Venice 1516**

Jewish people, by virtue of their different religious activities requiring so many regulations, had always lived in tight communities. Jewish separatism went back to the eleventh century. It was some sort of “Ghetto by choice”, for protection rather than incarceration.

But the sixteenth century introduced the “ghetto” or “Jewish quarter” under lock and key. Jews were now together in tight quarters as they would be in prison.

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The ghetto had moved from protection to incarceration, and the results were often lethal.

Others ghettos would be introduced in Frankfurt, Rome and Prague, following the Venice model. The apex of ghetto life took place during the 1940s in Eastern Europe in cities like Lodz and Warsaw amongst many others.

In 1516, the doges, Venice's ruling council of elders, decided to let the Jews remain in Venice as long as their presence be confined to one specific area, namely the small island known as “Ghetto Nuova.

Jews from different communities of Europe moved into the Ghetto and even lived in separate communities within the ghetto itself.

Life in the ghetto was becoming more and more restricted for the Jewish people. They could only leave during the day with special permission and with the yellow circle on their clothes. The Venice ghetto and all subsequent ones were overcrowded and always at the mercy of diseases and fires.

**The Reformation: Martin Luther and the Jews**

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a German Catholic priest and professor of theology who started the Protestant Reformation after nailing his 95 Theses in 1517 on the church door in Wittenberg. He was excommunicated in 1521 because of his refusal to retract his views seen as heresy by the Catholic Church. His translation of the Bible in German and not Latin made it more accessible to the masses and had a tremendous impact.

Originally not against the Jews, towards the end of his life he turned on them and published several pamphlets including the still widely published *On the Jews and their Lies*.

In his book *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther used language that at the very least equaled the past and future diatribes against the Jewish people.

*What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming. ... I shall give you my sincere advice:*
First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians.

In Deuteronomy 13:12 Moses writes that any city that is given to idolatry shall be totally destroyed by fire, and nothing of it shall be preserved. If he were alive today, he would be the first to set fire to the synagogues and houses of the Jews.

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them the fact that they are not masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are living in exile and in captivity, as they incessantly wail and lament about us before God.

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb.

Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home.

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. The reason for such a measure is that, as said above, they have no other means of earning a livelihood than usury, and by it they have stolen and robbed from us and they possess.

Seventh, I recommend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam.... For, as we have heard, God’s anger with them is so intense that gentle mercy will only tend to make them worse and worse, while sharp mercy will reform them but little. Therefore, in any case, away with them!
Luther also preached several sermons in Eisleben, right before his death in 1546, in which he continued to paint the Jews as enemies of Christianity in need of conversion or expulsion. While none of the European rulers enacted all of Luther anti-Semitic recommendations, in his lifetime, his legacy provoked many riots and massacres after his passing and lasts to this day.

Scholars like Lucy Dawidowicz in “The War Against the Jews:1933-1945” claim that:

“...both Luther and Hitler were obsessed by the "demonologized universe" inhabited by Jews”

As a matter of fact, many scholars and historians believe that Luther's view of the Jews had a profound effect on Germans for centuries to come, and also had serious influence on Hitler's ideology and implementing the final solution to the Jewish question. The link between Luther and Hitler is more obvious that one might think and is very clear, at the very least in the Jewish mindset.