

# Jews in Medieval History: A Teacher's Guide

## Overview

There are two parts to this document. This first part outlines key points about Jewish history that should be included when teaching about the Middle Ages. The second part fills out these points in a narrative summary of medieval Jewish history.

## Note

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## Key Points

- 1) Jewish communities were part of European, North African, and Southwest Asian societies during the Middle Ages.
- 2) As a religious minority Jews were vulnerable to antisemitism.
- 3) Medieval Jewish history should not be seen only as a period of victimization.
- 4) There were areas of relative religious tolerance, but tolerance in the medieval world was qualitatively different than tolerance as understood in modern democracies.

## Summary of Medieval Jewish History

By the early Middle Ages, Jewish communities existed throughout Europe, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. There were also Jewish settlements in other areas such as East Africa, Central Asia, India, and beyond. Jews established these communities in the classical period for two primary reasons. First, like people of all backgrounds, individual Jews migrated from their homeland to find new opportunities. Thus, Jews left the Land of Israel and settled in the cosmopolitan cities of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Second, the majority of Jews living in their ancestral homeland were forced to leave as slaves or exiles following unsuccessful attempts to regain independence in the first and second centuries C.E.

Despite this expulsion, Rome's treatment of the Jewish people before the fourth century C.E. was generally similar to its treatment of other subject peoples. Although Roman rule had negative consequences, such as heavy tax burdens and harsh responses to opposition, there were also benefits and Jews throughout the Roman Empire usually did not face official discrimination. There were acts of official antisemitism that could be extremely severe, but this was atypical. Generally, Jews were given the same rights as other peoples. For example, in 212 C.E., free Jews were granted Roman citizenship along with all other free inhabitants of the empire.



However, due to the influence of replacement theology after the Christianization of the empire in the fourth century C.E., Jews began to face harsh discriminatory laws. Replacement theology is the idea that Judaism is an incomplete religion that Christianity replaced and, therefore, Jews should occupy an inferior place in society. As a result, Jewish rights were restricted.

Discriminatory laws against Jews continued throughout the medieval period under both Christian and Muslim rule. In Europe, Jews were usually not allowed to own land. Many areas had laws that required them to wear special clothes so they could be easily identified and/or required them to live in special areas of a city called ghettos. These ghettos were overcrowded and impoverished. Frequently, there were laws that prohibited Jews from being outside the ghetto after sunset or during Christian holidays. The treatment of Jews was usually better under Muslim rule than it was in Christian Europe. But Jews and other religious minorities did not have legal equality there either. Instead, religious minorities were given “dhimmi” status. Usually, dhimmi life, property, and freedom of religion were protected, but their legal and social rights were restricted. For example, they had to pay a special tax and faced various other restrictions such as limitations on where they could worship. The specific restrictions and overall treatment that religious minorities faced varied across time and place in both Christian and Muslim lands.

As a minority group, Jews were vulnerable to outbreaks of violence throughout the medieval world. Sometimes, this was due to religious fervor. For example, during the first crusade bands of knights and peasants massacred Jewish communities in what is today Germany. Jews also faced violence because they were unjustly blamed for tragedies and natural disasters. For example, when the Black Death swept through Europe, Jewish communities across the continent were attacked. Jews could also be scapegoated for local problems such as the disappearance of a child. In addition to acts of violence, Jews were also vulnerable to expulsions. Between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries Jews were expelled at least thirty-four times from major European cities and states. The most famous example of this was in 1492 when every Jew in Spain was forced to convert, die, or leave the country. Other places where Jews were expelled from include England, France, Portugal, and parts of what is today Germany, Italy, Austria, and Hungary.

On the other hand, medieval Jewish history should not be seen only as a period of victimization. Jewish communities had a wide variety of relationships with the majority cultures in different places and at different times. These experiences ranged from harsh persecution to cooperative coexistence. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jewish culture flourished and generated great works of scholarship, such as the texts described below. Jewish communities also created distinctive songs, stories, and customs.

Famous medieval Jewish individuals illustrate that Jews were able to thrive at times during the Middle Ages. The following three individuals lived in different areas (France, Spain, and Egypt) and had different professional experiences (one was a scholar in a Jewish institution, one was a businessman and explorer, and one was a philosopher and court physician). Together, they illustrate the existence of positive aspects in the medieval Jewish experience.

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105) headed a Rabbinic academy in northern France. He wrote influential commentaries on the two sacred Jewish texts that form the foundation of



Jewish law, ethics, and religious practice: the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. His commentary has been included in printings of the Talmud since the fifteenth century. His commentary on the Hebrew Bible is also usually included in Hebrew printings of that work.

Benjamin of Tudela (mid-twelfth century) was an explorer and businessman who visited over 300 cities in Europe, Asia, and Africa. He described his travels in a book entitled *The Voyages of Benjamin*. Today, historians consider this work an important source of information about medieval geography and daily life.

Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1204) was a successful physician who was highly regarded by the court of the Egyptian caliph. He wrote the first summary of all Jewish law, which remains influential today. In other written works, he strove to reconcile traditional Jewish teaching with Greek philosophy. His writings influenced later Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas.

The successes of these individuals were possible only because there were times and places when tolerance existed in medieval world. However, there are two important points to remember about tolerance of minorities in the Middle Ages. First, horrific intolerance could erupt in even the most tolerant medieval societies. For example, Muslim-ruled Spain is deservedly praised as an area where Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted and worked together to create great cultural achievements. It is often referred to as “the Golden Age of Spain.” Yet, persecution and violence, such as the massacre of the majority of the Jewish population in Granada in 1066, still occurred. Second, it is important to remember that tolerance in the medieval world was not the same as tolerance in modern democracies like the United States. In the Middle Ages, tolerance did not mean that all people were seen as equal. Rather, it meant that the majority tolerated minority groups and granted them basic protections. Even in the most tolerant medieval societies, religious minorities did not have legal equality.

Jewish emancipation, the removal of discriminatory laws against Jews, did not begin until the end of the eighteenth century. It grew out of Enlightenment philosophy, which emphasized natural rights, equality, and tolerance. The first European nation to emancipate its Jews was France in 1791. By the end of the nineteenth century, most Western European countries had granted Jews political and legal equality with other citizens. Jews increasingly applied their traditional emphasis on learning and scholarship to secular subjects, and individual Jews succeeded in science, business, and the arts.

Although Jewish emancipation removed many obstacles from Jewish life, antisemitism remained a major problem in Western Europe even after legal equality had been granted. Individuals and institutions continued to promote anti-Jewish stereotypes and to discriminate against Jews. In Eastern Europe, governments continued to tolerate and even sponsor pogroms, violent attacks against Jews. Antisemitic ideas, practices, and attacks underly developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as the growth of political Zionism and the horrors of the Holocaust. Despite its shortcomings, Jewish emancipation opened up new possibilities for Jews and was a major step forward in the creation of modern democracies that respect diversity and religious pluralism.

