

Robert Chazan,
THE JEWS OF MEDIEVAL WESTERN CHRISTENDOM

THE JEWISH LEGACY

Before the year 1000, the Jewish people had already gone through many changes. After having been a religious-political entity, the Jews had suffered a number of disasters that could have ended their history. Out of earlier military defeat and exile they had developed new organizational structures and religious insights. By the time tensions between the Jews and the Romans escalated in first century Palestine, leading to a decisive defeat, the destruction of the Jewish capitol and of their spiritual center (the Temple) in Jerusalem, the Jews already had developed ways to continue politically and religiously.

The Jewish people had already experienced the existence of a permanent diaspora community outside of Israel since their defeat by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. Most Jews were exiled to Mesopotamia. Quite soon however Jews were allowed to return to their homeland, but many stayed in Mesopotamia permanently. The Jewish community in Mesopotamia eventually became the second important Jewish community, after the one in Palestine. After the defeat by the Romans, power shifted away from the Palestinian community to the Mesopotamian diaspora. By the end of the third century, the diaspora community had become more important than the community in Israel, in size, creativity, and influence. It was the Mesopotamian Talmud (called the "Babylonian Talmud"), not the Palestinian, that eventually ended up dominating Jewish religious life.

By the year 1000, Jews were used to living under the rule of others. Even in the center of Jewish life in Palestine, the Jews were used to agreeing to the political will of ruling foreigners. During the period of the Second Commonwealth the Jews of Palestine enjoyed political independence under their own Hasmonean royalty for less than a century. During the rest of the period, the Jews lived under the control of Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

Being under control of another nation had taught the Jews to manage their affairs as a minority. The Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud both show that the communities had developed ways to organized themselves. By the year 1000, when Jews increasingly lived in Western Christian lands, they already had learned how to live a comfortable life as a minority community and to deal with the loss of independence.

Very little is known of Jewish existence and religious life in pre-1000 western Christendom. As we learn about the growing Jewish communities in this area, it becomes clear that they had deeply rooted literary traditions and long-established ways to organize themselves. Jewish religious life was rooted in the notion of divine revelation as recorded in Hebrew Scripture. The definite text of Scripture had been established and served for them as the source for behavioral guidelines and for understanding Jewish concepts of responsibility.

Although the biblical text itself does not change, the ways in which the text is read and understood can vary. By 1000 CE, traditional interpretations existed side by side with innovative ideas and philosophies which had been developed within the Muslim environment. These newer modes of interpretation were to become a controversial issue within the Medieval Jewish communities. Linguistic insights also were to play an important role. The question if a holy text was correctly or wrongly understood became an essential theme within Christian missionary activity among the Jews as well as for Jewish polemical literature in defense against these proselytizing efforts.

In the traditional Jewish faith, Scripture (called the Written Torah) is supplemented with an extra-scriptural tradition called the Oral Torah, both traced back to the event at Mount Sinai and thus regarded as divine revelation. This Oral Law was enriched through ongoing debates by Jewish scholars and further expanded by Jewish religious institutions. Over time, the Oral Law was written down, first in the Mishnah in late-second and early-third century Palestine. Since the Mishnah was quite vague in its legal instruction, it was taken on as an explication project by Jewish scholars in both Palestine and Babylonia, resulting in the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmuds. However, eventually the Babylonian Talmud became the dominate guide to Jewish academic life and behavioral norms.

Jewish life revolved around the synagogue and the home. When and where synagogues originated is unclear, but by the year 1000 it was a well-established institution. It was the place where communal rituals took place such as daily, weekly and annual prayers and celebrations. The leadership of the synagogue was in the hands of those who mastered the Torah and the Rabbinical writings, who could guide the community in their practical implications, and who would encourage the community members to fulfill their obligations. The synagogue was a center for Jewish education and moral preaching. Family rituals, on the other hand, revolved around the home. Much of Jewish teaching and practice took place within the family. Besides the synagogue, the home is where everyday life was inspired with deep religious meaning. In short, when more and more Jews settled in western Christendom, they came equipped with the structures that would help them guide and enrich their lives and resist the pressures of the Christians majority.

Jews living under Christian rule around the year 1000 knew how to function as a subservient minority and could justify the role they played in this subservient position. Any experience they had built up under Christian rule before the year 1000, of which we know very little, was supplemented with the much richer experience from living under Islam. Additionally, the Jews entering western Christendom from Islamic lands brought along what they had absorbed from the starting cultural and spiritual awakening that was later passed on to European civilization. These growing numbers of Jews in western Christendom would be faced with many challenges in centuries to come.