Introduction to Jewish History

Photo: *An archaeological excavation at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem*

Note: It would be literally impossible to summarize three thousand years of Jewish history on just fifteen pages, not least because for the last 2,500 years, Jews have been dispersed all over the world.

This module illuminates just a few important events, periods, people, and issues in Jewish history and does not aim to be comprehensive. We have chosen to focus on a number of exemplary figures who played an important role in the development of Jewish intellectual life in various regions at different times. Unfortunately, no woman is among them, as up to the nineteenth century the role of Jewish women was confined to the household.

A note on the pronunciation of Hebrew terms: In general, this follows English pronunciation, with the exception of "ch", which is pronounced (χ).

Diaspora/*Galut*

The Greek word *diaspora* means dispersal or scattering. Today it is used to describe people of all nationalities, who live outside their home countries. Yet originally the word was only applied to Jews living outside the Holy Land. The Hebrew term *Galut* (exile) was also long used. It was only in the twentieth century that a Hebrew equivalent to *diaspora* was coined, *Tfutzot*.

In examining the history of Jews and Judaism, one cannot fail to notice that Jews settled in various parts of the world and lived for a long time outside the Holy Land.
Amazingly, over a period of 2,000 years Jews continued to consider themselves one people and were also seen as such by others, although no Jewish state existed throughout this period.

The history of the Jewish people is characterised by the experience of exile from their homeland. In the Bible we find the important (yet undocumented) description of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt (Moses 2-5), on which the Pessach festival is based.

The first historically documented exile of the Jewish people was the Babylonian captivity (586-538 BC). This occurred after the capture of the Kingdom of Judah in 586 BC and the subsequent burning of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (the "First Temple"). While the majority of the Jewish population remained at this time, many priests, court servants, and the urban upper class were deported to Babylon. There they developed a theology according to which God was not only present in the Temple in Jerusalem, but also in exile. This marked the transition from the worship of one God among many (henotheism) to the belief in the existence of only one true God (monotheism). The fall of the Kingdom of Judah was attributed not to any weakness on God's part, but to the failure of the Jewish people to obey His commandments. The customs which gained importance during this time of exile were those which could be observed and practised away from the Temple and the Jewish homeland. They included in particular the Sabbath and circumcision – both of which continue to be central elements in all branches of the Jewish faith.

Following the victory of the Persians over the Babylonians in 539 BC, Jews were permitted to return to the Promised Land. While this return was slow at first, the Temple was rebuilt ("Second Temple"). In order to gain the status of a

minority under the Persians, the Jews were obliged to put their commandments and traditions on paper. Today this is seen as a key motivation for writing the Torah. This book was written based on the experiences of both those Jews who stayed at home and those who returned from Babylonian captivity and it describes ways of practising religion both at home and in exile.

Shortly after the return from Babylonian captivity, Palestine was captured by the Greeks. In 168 BC the Jews lost their status as an autonomous minority, the Temple was dedicated to Zeus, and the Torah was declared to be invalid as a legal document.

Subsequently, the revolt of the Maccabees took place and the Temple was re-dedicated. This event is remembered at Hanukah.

Once the first aim had been achieved (the re-dedication of the Temple and the reinstitution of the Torah as a legal source), numerous wars of conquest began, which extended well beyond the previous borders of the Kingdom of Judah.

They culminated in the Roman occupation of Palestine. In the year 70 AD Jerusalem finally fell following some major Jewish revolts, and the Temple was burned to the ground. After this event there would be no Jewish State in the Promised Land for almost 2,000 years. The Temple was never again rebuilt.

Image: The Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire

The Jewish Middle Ages

The Jewish Middle Ages are generally seen to begin with the Muslim-Arab conquests (632 AD) and last until the second half of the seventeenth century. Depending on their geographic location, Jews typically lived under Christian or Islamic rule in this period and this is why it tends to be treated as a single epoch.

"The contacts and struggles between Judaism and Islam lacked the intimacy and bitterness that characterised early relations between Jews and Christians at the time when the latter were breaking away from the Jewish faith. The disputes between Jews and Christians revolved around the validity of the law, the question of whether the Messiah had come, the incarnation and ascension of Jesus, and the nature of the divine. By contrast, the disputes between Judaism and Islam were focussed on the question of whether the predictions of the Prophets had ceased before or with Mohammed and on the differences between Islamic and Jewish legal texts."[2]

This may explain the significant differences in the situations of Jews within Christian and Islamic societies during the Middle Ages. In the context of the Muslim wars of conquest under Umar ibn al-Chattab (592-644 AD) laws on the treatment of subject peoples were passed. Among them was a provision guaranteeing the protection of members of monotheistic religions (*ahl al-kitāb*, the people of the book). Thus Jews became *ḍimmis*, protected under the law. While it may have curbed their religious freedom and made them subject to high taxes, this status allowed them to keep and practise their faith without being confined to ghettos, as in Europe.

Contacts between Jews and Muslims in regions under Islamic rule were far closer than those between Jews and Christians in predominantly Christian regions. This was due not only to the fact that Jews were not forced to live in ghettos, but also to a common language. Arabic was one of the languages in which Islamic philosophers and theologians wrote. Jewish scholars could read Arabic and also used it in their own publications. Many important works emerged from the Jewish reception of Islamic theology at this time.

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[2] Ben-Sasson, Haim Hillel: Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, Munich, 1978, p. 494

The Iberian Peninsula

As shown on the above map, the oldest Jewish communities in present-day Portugal and Spain were already present in Roman times. Yet they enjoyed their so-called "golden age" in the period of Arab-Islamic rule from 711/713 when the Arabs succeeded in driving the Visigoths from the Iberian Peninsula. Under the Emirate of Cordoba from 755 many Jews ascended the ranks of the higher state administration to become ministers and military officials or made a name for themselves as doctors and scholars.

Educated Jews fluent in many languages also played an important role as mediators between the religions. It was mainly Jewish scholars in Spain, who translated Islamic academic writings into Castilian and Catalan. These texts were then translated by Christians into Latin. If it weren't for this mediation by Jews, high scholasticism would never have developed.

The Achievements of Spanish Jewry[3]

Subject	Author	Work	Significance
Hebrew grammar	Juda b. David Hayyuj (945-1000)	Fundamental works on the Hebrew verb (in Arabic)	First theory of the Hebrew verb inspired by Arabic grammars
Hebrew grammar and poetry	Samuel ha-Nagid (993-1055); Wesir and Halacha expert	Dictionary of biblical Hebrew (Arabic); Ben Tehellim; Ben Mischlé; Ben Qohelet	High point of Hebrew lexicology; unique example of Hebrew war poetry; also court and moral poetry
Hebrew grammar	Jona Ibn Janach (first half of the 11th century)	Grammar and dictionary (in Arabic)	Its two parts represent the first comprehensive description of biblical Hebrew.
Hebrew grammar and Bible commentaries	Abraham Ibn Esra (1089-1164)* Poet, grammar expert, astronomer, doctor, and philosopher	Wrote several grammars in Italy in the mid-12th century; commentaries on almost all books of the Bible	Transmitted Arabic-Jewish grammar to the Occident. His work is based on grammatical and rational principles. He was ahead of his time in his emphasis on semantics.
Bible commentaries	Mose b. Nachman; Ramba" n (1194-1270	In particular Torah commentaries and commentaries on the Book of Job	intensive discussions of his main precursors
Halacha	Isaak Alfasi (Ri"f) (1013-1103)	Sefer ha-Halkhot	Integration of the Haggadah into halachic

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[3] Source: Galley, S.: Das Judentum, Frankfurt/Main, 1006, p. 82

France

As shown on the above map, the history of the Jews in France goes as far back as the Roman Empire. Jews had lived in Gaul since the time of Caesar and they were given extensive rights under the Franks. These rights were expanded under the rule of Charlemagne. Yet after his death they began to be eroded, and during the Crusades Jewish history in France was a turbulent mix of anti-Jewish excesses and their subsidence, repeated expulsions and returns of Jews, until they were finally expelled in the fourteenth century. Two centuries would pass before Jews (mainly converted Jews from Spain) were readmitted to France.

In terms of religious rite, France was divided: Jews in the South of France followed the Sephardic tradition, while those in the north followed the Ashkenazy tradition.[4]

"The communities of the *Midi* benefitted […] from the unbroken urban culture of the Mediterranean region with its "Roman" influences; they were far better integrated than their brethren in Northern Europe."[5]

In 1791 full civil rights were extended to French Jews in the wake of the French Revolution.[6]

Germany

In Germany too there is evidence of very early Jewish communities. The first recorded Jewish settlement on German territory was in Cologne even before the first Christian community became established there. In Germany, Jews and Christians lived side by side for almost 1,000 years in relative harmony – this is seen in the settlement of Jews in town centres.

Yet in Germany the first Crusade also marked a watershed – in and around the year 1069 pogroms led by aggressive mobs, similar to those in many French cities, took place here.

After a period of relative calm, the thirteenth century witnessed a new wave of pogroms stirred up by rumours of ritual murders and host desecration. As in France, in Germany, periods of harmony alternated with outbursts of anti-Jewish persecution. This was the case well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: "In 1510 burnings of Jews took place in Berlin, and Jews were expelled from Bavaria in 1551, from the Palatinate in 1555, from the March of Brandenburg in 1573, and from Austria in 1671."[7]

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[4] Galley, p. 89
[5] Galley, p. 99
[6] Ortag, p. 87
[7] Ortag, p. 91

Devekut should extend to all areas of life; everybody had the task of accessing God in all situations." (Galley, p. 139)

After Besht's death Hasidism became an important mystic movement in Poland and Ukraine, but was bitterly opposed by traditional scholars.

Source of image: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_ben_Elieser

Yiddish

Even after their migration to Poland, German Jews retained their language, Yiddish, a dialect of Middle High German, which functioned as a lingua franca for Ashkenazy Jews over many centuries. There were several dialects of Yiddish – depending on the speaker's location his language was inflected with Polish or Ukrainian. A distinction is made between West and East Yiddish, i.e. the Yiddish spoken in Western and Eastern Europe. Yiddish exists as a literary language since the sixteenth century and is typically written using Hebrew characters. Hebrewisms are generally written as in Hebrew, but pronounced differently. The decline of West Yiddish began with the Haskalah, the enlightenment and emancipation of Western European Jewry. Soon Yiddish was only spoken by Jews in Eastern European, where it survived well into the nineteenth century when a rich Yiddish-language literature emerged.

However, the various Jewish catastrophes of the twentieth century furthered the decline of the language. An estimated 11 million Jews, 60% of the world's Jewish population, spoke Yiddish before World War II. Today there are approximately 3 million Yiddish speakers worldwide. Yet only a few Jews in ultra-orthodox communities in Israel and the USA speak Yiddish as their first language. Yiddish speakers in the USA speak an American Yiddish dialect. In both countries secular movements are promoting a revival of Yiddish.

The close proximity of Yiddish to German is still clearly felt, as in the following transliteration of the numbers one to ten:

Ejns, zwej, draj, fir, finf, seks, sibn, acht, najn, zen

For an impression of Yiddish, watch this news programme:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3X2d7cjahc&feature=fvst

An attempt to revive Yiddish: Google Yiddish

Ladino

Ladino or Judeo-Spanish, a language spoken by Jews of Spanish origin, developed only after the expulsion of Jews from Spain and was for them what Yiddish was for Ashkenazy Jews. Innumerable Ladino dialects existed, depending on particular communities and their geographic locations, which extended from England, Italy, and Amsterdam, to North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. In the past Ladino was spoken by many Jews and, like Yiddish, it had the status of a lingua franca. Yet today there are less than 200,000 Ladino speakers worldwide, with very few of these speaking it as their first language. However, in Israel and other countries there are associations that strive to preserve the Ladino heritage and projects aimed at documenting the language.

The numbers one to ten in Ladino:
Uno, dos, trez, kuatro, sinko, sesh, syete, ocho, mueve, dyez

The Little Prince in Ladino, in Hebrew and Latin script