

Jews in Medieval Christendom

“Slay Them Not”

Edited by

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BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2013

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“*VITAM FINIVIT INFELICEM*”: MADNESS, CONVERSION,
AND ADOLESCENT SUICIDE AMONG JEWS
IN LATE TWELFTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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When the words: suicide, religious identity and medieval Jewry are put together in one sentence, let alone an essay title, medievalists tend almost immediately to invoke certain images: those of the anti-Jewish riots that took place in the Rhineland in the spring of 1096 or the events of March 1190 in Clifford’s Tower, York. These scenes and events will affect our discussion but they will not be at the center of inquiry. Rather than look at those who supposedly died a heroic martyr’s death, this article focuses on those individuals that harbored religious doubt and considered conversion. We should bear in mind that the Jewish communities in medieval Europe lived as religious minorities under Christendom, having a complex relationship with their surroundings, defined by Jonathan Elukin in the phrase used for the title of his book: “living together, living apart.”¹ The two cases that will be discussed below deal with how this deliberation eventually led to suicide. The Jewish martyrs and the role their image played in twelfth-century Jewish mentality will indeed be discussed, but will remain in the background.

The act of suicide has always puzzled mankind. Taking one’s own life was and is still commonly associated with madness, mental disorders, and acute depression. In pre-modern times the act of suicide was also linked to demonic possession and diabolical works. In the realm of Judaism we find discussions about suicide as early as the Bible, as well as homiletic writing in the Talmudic period. Jewish legal (Halakhic) sources have discussed the act of suicide and its implications on the victim and his family, especially with regard to *Hilkhot Avelut*—the Jewish rites of burial and mourning. According to Jewish law issues of life and death are ascribed to the Lord himself, or to an authorized legal tribunal. An individual may not make a decision to terminate his own life except in specific cases where one would be forced to commit one of the three cardinal Jewish

* This article is supported by the I-CORE Program of the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Israeli Committee for Higher Education and The Israel Science Foundation (ISF) grant No. 1754.

¹ J. Elukin, *Living Together Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

sins (idolatry, adultery, or manslaughter), in which case one is expected to favor death over transgression.²

Even in such extreme cases the Jewish code of law requires that one should be passive rather than active in bringing about one's own death. Suicide victims were categorized as "evil" (*resha'im*) for transgressing and violating the sanctity of life. The discussion in Talmudic sources raises the question of whether the suicidal individual is indeed "evil" in his decision to take his own life. Understanding the act of suicide as a result of "temporary insanity" does appear in the Talmud, thus casting the victim into a different—and slightly more compassionate—category, in which he was treated as a sick individual. The repercussions for the victim's family were also taken into consideration in the Talmudic discussion, which probes the question of whether to deprive the victim of the proper rites of an honorable burial.

In an article published a few years ago, William C. Jordan outlined the parameters for a new research agenda.³ Jordan drew scholarly attention to a connection between conversion and adolescence, a connection he claimed his research subjects, the medieval public, had noticed as well. Crossing religious boundaries and conversion in adolescence, or shortly after, is strongly associated with the tribulations of this phase in human life. In many cases, even if the actual act of conversion will happen some years later, the seeds are planted during these formative years. Jordan used a powerful example to illustrate his argument: a close reading and analysis of a text like the *Opusculum de conversione sua* written by *Hermanus quondam Judaeus* or Herman-Judah of Köln. As a result of Aviad Kleinberg's argument regarding the authenticity of this text and its author, it is safe to say that Herman's change of heart occurred in his adolescent years only to materialize in his young adulthood.⁴

² See Simha Goldin, *The Ways of Jewish Martyrdom*, trans. Yigal Levin, trans. ed. C. Michael Copeland (Turnhout: Brepols Publishing, 2008).

³ W.C. Jordan, "Adolescence and Conversion in the Middle Ages: A Research Agenda," M.A. Signer & J. Van Engen (eds.), *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, Notre Dame Conferences in Medieval Studies no. 10 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 77–93.

⁴ On this text and its authenticity see A. Kleinberg, "Hermanus Judaeus's *Opusculum*: In a defense of its authenticity," *Revue des Études Juives* 151 (1992), 337–353. Herman's text has been discussed quite extensively in the past two decades; see J. Cohen, "The Mentality of the Medieval Jewish Apostate: Peter Alfonsi, Hermann of Cologne, and Pablo Christiani," T.M. Endelman (ed.), *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1987), 20–47, K. Morrison, *Conversion and Text: The Cases of Augustine of Hippo, Herman-Judah, and Constantine Tsatsos* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1992), 39–113, J.C. Schmidt, *The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography*,

Adolescence is characterized by radical physical changes associated with puberty and achieving sexual maturity. Modern psycho-biology links these changes to extensive hormonal activity, causing emotional and personal changes accompanied by a growing awareness of the self and the projected self image. At times adolescence is accompanied by an identity crisis linked to the process of defining the self vis-a-vis others (the nuclear family, the immediate social circles, and broader circles such as the respective adolescent peer community). Adolescents also tend to wrestle with ideological issues rather intensely. Having said this, it is not surprising that adolescent behavior is sometimes characterized by others, especially the adult community, as impulsive and incoherent. Dramatic changes of mood and what seems to adults at times to be a constant attempt to challenge the adult world, world views, beliefs and behavioral code are typical of these years in the human life cycle. In some cases this will become outward defiance towards values thought of as sacred in the adult social mindset. Some adolescents challenge the social boundaries, others cross them defiantly. In the two cases I wish to examine closely here the boundaries in question are not mere group boundaries but rather socio-religious boundaries reinforced by strict taboo. This article will follow Jordan's suggested method of close textual reading, implementing it on two texts, while adding another variant into his suggested equation of adolescents' self-identity and the issue of religious conversion: that of suicide.

Suicide, a psychological phenomenon powerfully resonating in the social sphere, has troubled humans for many centuries. Family members, friends and the respective communities of suicide victims are usually left stunned and overwhelmed by this act. Suicide leaves many puzzled and many burning questions unresolved. Much like suicide, the phenomenon of religious conversion also received a variety of harsh responses, especially in the medieval world. The reactions we find to religious conversion in medieval literary culture are very powerful, riddled with a heavy use of derogatory language. In many cases we find similar language and moral judgments exercised with regard to suicide. Both actions are time and again associated with madness and deranged behavior.

The protagonists in the two stories discussed below are two young Jewish men that belonged to the minority Jewish community in late twelfth-century England. Their actions had powerful social ramifications

History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century, trans. Alex J. Novikoff (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2010).

on their immediate surroundings, within their immediate community as well as outside it. Both stories are set against the background of the Jewish-Christian debate and religious competition as well as the possibility of Jewish conversion. In the first case that will be discussed, such a possibility is expressed explicitly, while the other is open to interpretation. However, even in the second story, where matters are not all clear, the potential conversion of the main protagonist seems to lurk behind the scenes.

The first story stems from a Jewish legal source in medieval Hebrew bringing forth the suicide story as an anecdote to illustrate a legal ruling regarding the rites of mourning over a victim of suicide. The second story appears in a miracle tale penned in Latin from a collection of *miracula* attributed to a local English saint and was designed to prove the retributive powers of the saint and how she took her revenge on someone who allegedly mocked her healing abilities and scorned those who believed in them.

The Case of Yom Tov ben Moshe of London

The case of Yom Tov ben Moshe's suicide appears in a Jewish legal (*Halakhic*) compendium attributed to Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (d.1293).⁵ The collection was probably put together following Rabbi Meir's death in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in Germany. Rabbi Meir was a Jewish supra-communal leader and dignitary, author of hundreds of *responsa* whose writings had a profound effect on his European Jewish contemporaries, as well as a longlasting effect that resonates among observant Jews to the present. Rabbi Meir had put together a handbook of religious customs that dealt with death, burial, and the rites of mourning and commemoration. In this handbook one can find a discussion regarding how to ritually react to an act of suicide. Drawing on previous literature, Rabbi Meir rebukes suicide as an evil act and rules that someone who has

⁵ On Rabbi Meir's life story see I.A. Agus, *Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg: His Life and His Works as Sources for the Religious, Legal, and Social History of the Jews of Germany in the Thirteenth Century* 2 Vols, (Philadelphia: Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1947). More recently: I.J. Yuval, "Meir ben Baruch aus Rothenburg (um 1200–1293), "Suprimus magister," ed. M. Tremel & W. Weigand, *Geschichte und Kultur der Juden in Bayern: Lebensläufe, Series: Veröffentlichungen zur bayerischen Geschichte und Kultur Band 17–18* (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, 1988), 21–24; S. Emmanuel, "Unpublished Responsa of R. Meir of Rothenburg as a Source for Jewish History," C. Cluse (ed.), *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries)*, Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Speyer, 20–25 October 2002 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 283–295.

committed **premeditated suicide** should be treated differently than other deceased family members and friends.⁶ “Premeditated suicide” is carefully defined, requiring a clear statement of intention by the protagonist, immediately followed by the lethal act and witnessed by at least two other lucid adults. These requirements narrowed down “premeditated suicide” in effect to becoming almost legally impossible according to the religious legal system of *Halakhah*. R. Meir does however reaffirm that once defined as “premeditated suicide” there should be a clear distinction between the funeral and mourning rituals honoring the dead, and the rites performed for the sake of the deceased’s family. To illustrate this point Rabbi Meir invokes the story of Yom-Tov.⁷

And there was a case in England. There was a young scholar of rich descent who was learning in a Talmudic academy [*Yeshiva*] and his name was Rabbi Yom-Tov, may his righteous name be of blessed memory. On the eve of the Jewish festival of Weeks [*Shavu’ot—the equivalent of Pentecost*] he took his belt and hanged himself. His father, Rabbi Moshe “the Pious” [*Hasid*], did not even leave his chamber nor shed a tear or even interrupt his study as if no harm had come to him for he said that his son had harmed himself.

... However we saw that our Lord the Rabbi [the aforementioned Rabbi Moshe b. Yom-Tov of London] said neither yes nor no.⁸ And servants and other heartless and mindless men were involved in the preparations of the body for burial and we did not touch his body. Only a few of the learned joined the servants in taking the body on a cart to the city of London to the cemetery. The Rabbi and the entire *Yeshiva* followed his coffin [= *participated in the funeral*]. On that night he [= *the deceased*] appeared to me⁹ in a dream and I saw him and he looked very beautiful, even more beautiful than he looked while alive and he appeared to many on that night and he said that he came to a **great light** [*Or Gadol*] and that he is safe and secure in the afterlife.

⁶ Rabbi Meir relies primarily on the rulings of the Talmudic external tractate known as Tractate *Semahot*- (literally: Rejoicing, a euphemistic nickname for the tractate originally known as the “Larger Tractate on Mourning”—*Evel Rabbtī*). For a fine summary in English discussing the issues highlighted in *Semahot* with regard to suicide, see A. Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages—Volume I: The Curse of Self Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 518–523.

⁷ Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, *Hilkhot Semachot, Ha’shalem A & Y Landa*, eds. (Jerusalem, 1976), 103–105 § 89. This version is based on MS BNF Heb. 1408 folio 31 § 88.

⁸ This sentence testifies that the community of learners assembled at the academy was left perplexed due to Rabbi Moshe’s non-decisive behavior.

⁹ The reference is to Rabbi Meir of England (“*Rabbi Meir me’ Angletter*”) whose compendium on the rituals of burial and mourning (which did not survive) served as one of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg’s sources for his own compendium on the subject as well as his source for the story of Yom-Tov’s suicide.

The Rabbi, may he be of blessed and righteous memory, also saw what he saw. And on the eighth of Sivan [after observing the two day festival of *Shavuot*] we rode to London and made a great eulogy in his memory.

“But that young man was a pious and god fearing man, in all these congregations [=in England] I have not seen any one like him, and he was sincerely honest and I saw in him all the essence of sanctity and purity.”¹⁰ Later on it became apparent that he had sentenced himself harshly, and there was also some demonic spirit within him. If a man does this [=sanctifying God’s name in a martyrological/suicidal fashion] to satisfy his own “pleasures” and in order just to have his sinful transgressions atoned swiftly and he does not do this for the true love of his creator you should know that “I [=God] will claim it from him.” And he (the deceased Yom-Tov) also used to say that a demon would torment him by showing him the shape of a crucifix and that he [=the demon] exhorted pressure on him to go and to worship idols [=convert to Christianity]. However it is far better for a man in such a case to succumb to the torments of physical repentance with self inflicted torture and mortification in this world [*ba’olam ha’zah*]¹¹ and then worship the holy one blessed be he with all his heart and might. One should thus engage in procreation, and his offspring will be righteous and wondrous and his life will rejuvenate like those of Job or others like him. The Talmudic sage Yossi ben Yoezer’s nephew had also judged himself severely and hanged himself. He was also a scholar and he died. At the moment of death a heavenly voice declared that he has a portion in the after-life.¹²

The text is highly informative and describes in relative detail the occurrences of the act of suicide as well as the community’s initial and subsequent reaction to the case. In light of the above a few observations about the events are appropriate:

(1) It is clear that the turning point in the story is the collective dream. Up until the collective dream, shared by Yom Tov’s peers as well as his father, (the head of the *yeshiva*) the reaction was governed by the assumption that Yom Tov had brought about his own death. Although from a purely legal point of view it could be seen not as an act of premeditated suicide, the father’s behavior, understood as a dictum by the academy’s students, forbade treating Yom Tov with the rites reserved to a deceased

¹⁰ I have placed this sentence in quotation marks since it seems to be part of the eulogy delivered in the London cemetery in the “second funeral.” I wish to thank my former student Hadas Fishman-Peretz for her insightful reading of the text that brought this matter to my attention.

¹¹ These words contrast *this world* with the after life, in Hebrew: *ha’olam ha’ba*—literally meaning “the world to come.”

¹² The translation of the text is my own.

scholar of *Torah*. Thus, the father made no changes in his own schedule and didn't even interrupt his learning to make the funeral arrangements. It should be noted that *Torah* scholars and even novices in scholarship were held in very high esteem within the medieval Jewish community. Although the obligation to attend to the funeral preparations normally rested on the shoulders of the first of kin (in this case the father), when dealing with a scholar the entire community was considered “first of kin” and the deceased was seen as an “obligatory deceased” [*met mitzvah*].¹³ It is as early as the rulings of the Tosefta (the extra-Mishnaic pre-Talmudic Palestinian Halakhic authoritative text) in the second century that we hear that “A sage who died[—]all are deemed his relations” [*hacham sh'met hacol kerovav*].¹⁴ Thus congregants were expected to drop all other occupations, including the highly valued acts of learning and prayer and as a sign of dignity attend both the pre-funeral arrangements as well as the funeral itself. In Yom Tov's case we hear the exact opposite. Not only did the father (Yom Tov's actual first of kin) remain in his chamber, he used his authority to prevent other members of the Talmudic academy from partaking in the funeral arrangements. These arrangements that were usually carried out by the recently departed kin and peers and considered a great honor were in this case taken care of by people the texts refers to as “heartless and mindless men.” This reference could either mean regular non-scholarly professional undertakers or non-Jewish servants. If that is the case, Yom Tov was exposed to an extremely derogatory and almost publicly humiliating treatment prior to the collective change of heart his community experienced in the wake of the dream.

(2) The nature of the evidence regarding the attitude towards Yom Tov's death should also concern us. Oddly enough according to strict legal guidelines, followed also by Rabbi Meir in his compendium, the physical evidence of this case would have acquitted Yom Tov of being labeled as evil and guilty of premeditated suicide. Yom Tov was found dead, hanging by his own belt, probably in his private chambers or elsewhere in the

¹³ *Encyclopedia Judaica* translates this term as: “unclaimed corpse.” I prefer my translation with regard to this case.

¹⁴ The text reads: “A sage who died[—]all are deemed his relations, all tear their garments and all bare their shoulders and all lament and all receive a mourner's meal on his account.” For the Hebrew original see *Tosephta (Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices)*, ed. M.S. Zukermantel & S. Liebermann (Wahrman Books Jerusalem 1970), Tractate *Moed Katan* 2:17 231. For the English translations see: *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew I–VI*, ed. J. Neusner (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1981), Vol. 2: Tractate *Moed Katan* 2:17, 305–6.

house or the academy. His actual act of suicide was not witnessed by others (or at least our text does not explicitly mention such a testimony). The father as well as the community could have assumed, without too much legal squabble, that Yom Tov might have actually repented a split second ante-mortem. This would have provided enough legal leeway to regard his death as an accident and not premeditated suicide. The community, following the supra-legal pietistic guidelines set by Yom Tov's father, Rabbi Moshe, mentioned in the text as Hasid (lit. meaning pious and labelling him as a follower of the pietistic meta-halakhic tradition) initially treated his death as premeditated suicide all the same. This judgment can be defined as typical of a Jewish pietistic approach, discussed at length by Ivan Marcus in his seminal study *Piety and Society*.¹⁵ By way of paradox it is the supernatural "evidence" presented in the collective dream that should have placed Yom Tov, following his own "statement" in the dream, that he had "judged himself harshly" [*dan atzmo be'humrah*] as a premeditated suicide case. But instead, it is precisely the supernatural "evidence" that gains Yom Tov his religious acquittal and subsequent social rehabilitation. It is only after the dream and the postponed eulogy that we hear that Yom Tov was a troubled soul tormented by demons—a fact that would have also promoted an acquittal. Demonic possession and visions of a demonic nature would have rendered Yom Tov as mentally unstable, thus depriving him from any legal responsibility for his actions, causing his death to be regarded as an act of temporary or permanent insanity. This change has to do with the third observation regarding this story.

(3) The third observation rests upon the language concerning the dream vision and the imagery it invokes. A close examination of the original Hebrew phrasing reveals it alludes to a code that was familiar to twelfth-century European Jews—the language of medieval Jewish martyrdom constructed in the twelfth century. Speaking of the deceased as appearing postmortem as "more beautiful than his beauty in actual life" and as arriving at a "great light in the afterlife" invokes this imagery in a very powerful way.¹⁶ Once Yom Tov's act is cast in this literary mould and

¹⁵ I.G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1981). On the ripple effect that pietistic thinkers like Rabbi Jehudah "the Pious" of Regensburg had on the overall Ashkenazi Jewish community, see the *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96(1) (2006) dedicated entirely to this book. Even if we adopt the view of those who oppose Marcus, there are issues in which the pietistic ideas had a profound effect on larger circles within the Jewish community.

¹⁶ Furthermore, other twelfth-century Jewish texts like the story of the 1096 Rhineland martyrs as well as the famous tale of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz's martyrdom

put in a martyrological context, it shifts from a case of premeditated suicide regarded by the pious father as evil and sinful to the realm of Jewish defiance of Christianity and its symbols, and advocates Jewish martyrdom. In twelfth-century Jewish eyes this identification with the acts of self-sacrifice is typical of some of the Jewish reactions to the riots of the First Crusade (1096) and thereafter puts Yom Tov's story in a fundamentally different context. It is clear from the text that Yom Tov was a troubled young soul. He was tormented by thoughts about his religious self-identity and according to both his postmortem dream statement, as well as antemortem evidence from his peers (surfacing in the text only in the aftermath of the suicidal act and placed suspiciously at the end of the text), we hear he had thoughts about conversion. These thoughts are described by a demon pushing him to “worship idols” and confronting him with the sign of a crucifix. Yom Tov, tormented by his deliberations and possibly externally pressed to make a decision regarding his standing point, could take this no longer.

(4) The date of the suicide mentioned in the text, the eve of the Jewish festival of Weeks (*Shavuot*), is also of some importance. In medieval England new converts to Christianity were publicly presented on the Pentecost Sunday also known as *Whitsunday*. The name Whitsunday refers to the white robes worn by the new converts parading publicly to the baptismal font.¹⁷ It seems that in order to avoid being drawn even further to Christianity, the young man—haunted by his heretical thoughts—ended his deliberations before he could be exposed. At first his act was not understood by his community but once the rumors of his deliberations become public the guilt-ridden community rehabilitates the young man—identifying his act as martyrdom and not as premeditated suicide

employ similar language and imagery. It should be noted that these texts were well known to twelfth-century English Jewry due to cultural and intellectual exchange as well as a network of family ties between English and Rhineland Jewries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Yom Tov's own family could easily trace its origins to a prominent Jewish family in eleventh-century Mainz in the Rhine valley, unlike other English Jews who were “imported” to Britain from the Norman town of Roan by William the Conqueror. On the story of Amnon of Maintz that in many ways is also a story of suicide and self mortification, see Ivan G. Marcus, “A Pious Community in Doubt: Jewish Martyrdom among Northern European Jewry and the Story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz,” ed. Z. Ben-Yosef Ginor, *Essays in Hebrew Literature In Honor of Avraham Holtz* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003), 21–46.

¹⁷ *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd. Edition eds. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1738. In the year 1200 the Jewish festival of Week (*Shavuot*) and the Christian Pentecost were celebrated on the same day, giving our story a possible date.

or an act of madness. This rehabilitation is marked by the return to Yom Tov's fresh burial place in the London Jewish cemetery (probably the one used until the 1290 expulsion in the area of Cripplegate) and the public eulogy he received. This component was missing from his original funeral service due to the identification of his act as premeditated suicide. It is noteworthy, however, that the rehabilitation is critiqued in the text where the author explicitly prefers physical mortification and torment of the body and subsequent marriage as a remedy for heretical thoughts over acts of suicide.¹⁸

(5) Yom Tov's rehabilitation posed an educational problem; his rehabilitation meant that the act of suicide in case of heretical deliberations was an acceptable solution and even possible role model for other adolescents to follow.¹⁹ Our author, aware of this puzzle, stresses therefore that although Yom Tov's act is a pious and righteous one, there are other avenues one can follow if overcome by a need to repent for troubling thoughts of conversion.

We've seen that the tribulations and religious crisis of an adolescent boy, possibly enhanced by sexual tensions, (the remark on the need to engage in protraction is rather suggestive and points in this direction)

¹⁸ Suggesting marriage in this context is of special importance. It may hint at the fact that these are indeed the deliberations of an adolescent youngster living in a conservative social framework with very little opportunity for sexual outlet. It reflects the social convention that inner tensions, similar to those experienced by Yom Tov, may have enhanced or intensified the sexual turmoil of adolescent life. Indeed, the aforementioned Herman Judah of Köln testified in his autobiography that when his family felt that his close contacts with Christians were resulting in thoughts of conversion and an ever growing affinity to Christianity they had made matrimonial arrangements for him as a means of both social control and an attempt to set the religious identity issues off his immediate agenda. These actions were partially successful, Herman said his affection to his newly-betrothed wife and the attractions of married life had indeed eased his religious tensions and deliberations for a period of two years. See K. Morrison, *Conversion and Text*.

¹⁹ Recent research, culminating with Jeremy Cohen's *Sanctifying the Name of God* published in 2004, has raised considerable doubt, or for the very least some puzzling thoughts, about what was considered for many years the sole sentiment towards the 1096 martyrs—absolute reverence and seeing their actions as an educational role model. Today we hear more about the muffled and covert critique of these actions of the 1096 martyrs and others who followed suit. It is perhaps the realization that this role model sheds some bad light on the survivors of the riots whose descendants have written the chronicles and the religious poems praising the actions of the martyrs that brought about these voices as well. Furthermore, some of the actions of the martyrs are at the very least halakhically questionable. Legal criticism was raised especially vis-à-vis the slaying of children during the acts of martyrdom that does not halakhically comply with the Talmudic requirements demanding passive martyrdom. These themes are discussed more today and appear to have been present in the twelfth-century discourse as well in both an explicit and even more so in an implicit manner.

drove him to suicide as a means of solving his religious identity crisis. The community, at first puzzled, resolved its own issue with the troubling case by identifying Yom Tov's attraction to Christianity as madness or demonic possession. Once in that realm the community as well as his family and peers could identify him as a troubled soul and reinterpret the act as one of religious passion and martyrdom and not as a "regular" case of suicide. Yom Tov is said to have resisted a religious temptation (in a similar manner to the way one is encouraged in traditional societies to overcome sexual temptations); although criticizing his behavior and suggesting alternatives (physical mortification of the body), our author sees his memory as rehabilitated, and he is reincorporated into Jewish society and thought of as a martyr.²⁰

*The Case of Deus-eum-crescat or Gedaliyah ben Moshe of Wallingford,
and the Relics of Frideswide of Oxford*

The second suicide story, unlike the first, is told from a critical and a far less favorable point of view to the Jewish protagonist and his community. The author in this case was Philip, the prior of the chapter of canons entrusted with relics of Frideswide of Oxford whose *miracula* he had collected and penned in proximity to the translation of her relics around the year 1188. At the time Frideswide was not a canonized saint, though much revered in Oxfordshire; she was only canonized in the later Middle Ages. The story Phillip recorded was designed to prove the retributive powers of the saint and how she took her revenge on someone who allegedly mocked her memory and thaumaturgical abilities and scorned those who believed in them.

Nor should we pass in silence the revenge which the Lord took on a certain Jew, called Deus-eum-crescat, [= Gedaliyah] (Jews used to call him in this fashion for prayers, instead of a proper name). He was the son of Moses of Wallingford, a man himself less detestable than many other Jews. [The boy], agitated by an evil spirit, began to insult the devotion of the Christian folk, mocking the divine virtue with blasphemous words, closing and opening his hands in a derisive way, halting and then walking firmly on his feet,

²⁰ On Jewish temptations to convert being colored as sexual temptation with a foreign woman and even an "incestuous" relationship with a "sister religion," see: Y.J. Yuval, "The Historian's Silence and the Author's Imagination: Rabbi Amnon of Mainz and Ester Mina of Worms," *Alpayim* 15 (1997), 132–141 (Hebrew).

pretending to perform miracles like our Frideswide, claiming gifts and oblations from the people.

And indeed both the miserable people [= the Jews] as well as the crowd of the believers, cursed him, a deed whose effects we'll describe later on.

Sitting by his father's table, he began redoubling his blasphemy and refusing to stop, even after he was admonished by his father, continued saying that Frideswide was unable to do anything, not even making him fear her. The father, with the utmost indignation, put a curse on him, telling him that "whatever was to be his destiny at the end of one hundred years would meet him instantly."

At his voice the blasphemous youth became silent, not long afterwards he fell in an apathetic mood (*accidia*), and as it were went out of his mind, became depressed and suffered a total mental collapse: for God's providence procured this effect, that a man who had used his mind shamefully should be handed over to the agents of Satan. Later the young man was invited to dinner by his father, but he refused, being afflicted by a hatred of life, and thinking about ways to accelerate his own death.

When the quiet of night replaced the labours of the day, at the dead of night, when all was silent, the wretch rose from his bed and went into his father's kitchen, and in order to have nothing interrupt the dreadful design he had in mind, sealed the inside of the door with wax. For a noose, he used the girdle he wore round his waist, casting it round both a beam and his neck, like the traitor Judas, and this way he finished his own unhappy life. . . . At dawn when the father missed his son, he looked for him high and low without success; he then finally broke down the kitchen door and found him hanged. Deeply shaken by what he had seen, he called his colleagues together secretly, urging them not to let this occurrence become public, and least of all to allow the Christians to know it. And so, just as their forefathers sought in vain to suppress the glorious news of Our Lord's resurrection, so that impious race tried to conceal that stroke of divine retribution. In vain, for human wit cannot conceal those things that God's wisdom and power make manifest.

The fame of this situation went through the whole city, bringing joy to the faithful and confusion to the infidels. . . . Then, since the hateful body was brought to London, as usual, in order to get buried, a big crowd of dogs joined the funeral howling, as is their custom, giving a suitable setting to the blasphemer's funeral.

Then, as it was witnessed by very trustworthy people, in the middle of the way the cart wheel broke down, the dead body fell on the ground, and because of its weight, or maybe because of the force of the fall, the neck through which the blasphemous words were uttered, broke in the fall, and for a good reason: because the injustice went through the fat [of the neck] to the thoughts of the heart. . . .²¹

²¹ This is an allusion to the standard commentary on Psalm 73:3.

Because the Jew had upset the Lord with his blasphemy and obnoxious speech he was taken from the living with a miserable death he had brought upon himself. And indeed he deserves a double serving of evil. For he is reserved for the day of oblivion and on that day of final judgment he will be brought to justice along with those who repel the wisdom of the Lord [= the Jews] that have so much hatred towards the Lord.²²

Here again as in Yom Tov’s case we have a story of an adolescent Jewish male who commits suicide following issues of religious self-identity and a personal relationship he has with the Christian faith and practices. It seems that although at first sight Gedalياهو’s behavior in the story is clear outright defiance against the Christian faith and its symbols, as in the first case here too the young protagonist was wrestling internally with his relationship towards Christianity. Gedalياهو’s behavior is clearly troubled and as in Yom Tov’s case we are dealing with a troubled adolescent or as Philip phrased it in the text, someone “who had been delivered to the agents of Satan.” The young Gedalياهو’s behavior, as well as the occurrences in the story, leave us with some puzzling issues and unresolved matters: what was a Jewish youngster doing among the crowd of those assembled to worship St. Frideswide’s relics? Furthermore even once “exposed,” Gedalياهو is subjected only to verbal violence (he is cursed by the crowd); there is no account in the text of acts of physical violence which would fit his rather outrageous and courageously foolish deed. Can it be that the troubled young man was both drawn to the cult of Frideswide only to scorn it later with an outward act of defiance?

In his innovative monograph *Reckless Rites*, Elliot Horowitz captioned this relationship with a phrase from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* “the fascination with the abomination.”²³ Indeed it should be noted that acts of Jewish defiant behavior toward symbols of Christianity were not altogether unknown in medieval England nor in medieval Christian Europe. One famous incident took place some eighty years after our

²² This is my revised translation based on J. Jacobs, *The Jews in Angevin England: Documents and Records, from Latin and Hebrew sources, Printed and Manuscript for the First Time Collected and Translated by Joseph Jacobs* English History by Contemporary Writers (London: D. Nutt, 1893), 68–70. I wish to thank Dr. Rachel Gellert for aiding me with this translation. The Latin original appears in: *Acta Sanctorum*, Oct. 8 (1853), 576–7. This text was discussed by Adolf Neubauer over a century ago: A. Neubauer, “Notes on the Jews of Oxford,” *Oxford Historical Society 16 Collectanea* 2nd ser. pt.4 (Oxford 1890), 277–318, specifically 282–4.

²³ E. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence: Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 185.

case on St. Edward's Day (March 18th according to the Oxford University calendar) at Oxford in 1268, when a Jew publicly attacked a cross and broke it.²⁴

Horowitz points out that previous Jewish scholarship was reluctant to admit such behavior, and at times even suggested the perpetrators were insane or behaved unintentionally. More recent scholarship, however, beginning with the late Jacob Katz in the 1960s, had suggested that these incidents could have indeed been actual premeditated occurrences aimed at defiantly expressing Jewish outrage with the symbols of idolatry and an oppressing faith.²⁵ The case currently under discussion, though similar, is somewhat different and slightly more complex. First of all, it is not Jewish apologetic historiography that deems the defiant Jew insane but rather the contemporary Christian chronicler. Moreover, unlike a cross or an icon understood by all Jews as signs of idolatry, not all Jews had always identified the saints, their cults, and their relics as outright manifestations of "idolatry." This issue, although clear to the Jewish learned elite, was a matter of a long-muffled debate within Jewish circles between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁶ In several occurrences we hear that among popular Jewish circles the cult of saints was not seen as equal to the crucifix or the figure of Jesus, both unanimously identified by Jews as "idols." The saint's relics Gedaliyah had mocked were well known in Oxfordshire for possessing healing powers, Frideswides's vita speaks explicitly of healing from blindness.²⁷ Is it possible that Gedaliyah, clearly a troubled young lad, was seeking the thaumaturgical aid of the saint only to be disappointed and

²⁴ On this incident see: C. Cluse, "Stories of Breaking and Taking the Cross: A Possible Context for the Oxford Incident of 1268," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique* 90 (1995), 438–439, as well as E. Horowitz, "Medieval Jews Face the Cross," ed. Y.T. Assis et al. *Facing the Cross: The Persecutions of 1096 in History and Historiography* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 118–140. esp. 136–140 (Hebrew).

²⁵ C. Roth, *The Jews of Medieval Oxford*, Oxford Historical Society New Series 9 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 152; J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Jewish Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 22–23; Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 149–155.

²⁶ I have written about this matter in "For a prayer in that place would be most welcome: Jews, Holy Shrines and Miracles—A New Approach," *Viator* 37 (2006), 369–395, and recently in "A Lame Jew, a Demon and a Healing Saint: Magical Healing by Christian Saints at Shrines amongst Jews of Medieval Germany—Participation, Polemics and Shared Cultures," *Harvard Theological Review* 103: 1 (2010), 111–29.

²⁷ Ronald Finucane has also made scholarly use of this miracle collection. See R. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

eventually to express his disappointment in a blasphemous manner? Why else would Philip have granted him the "temporary insanity" trapdoor escape from been accused of blasphemy and subsequent corporal punishment? Apart from these questions just raised there are other questions to be asked. The text concludes with a rather lengthy moral reckoning by Philip with Gedalياهو's punishment and the way it should be understood. There is almost a tangible sense of disappointment in the text with regard to Gedalياهو. Philip speaks of how he deserves a "double serving of evil" and that he will be judged in the *dies irae* along with the Jewish non-believers. This of course conjures the question of whether there was even a hypothetical possibility otherwise; was Philip perhaps expecting a different outcome since Gedalياهو was a Jew—or wasn't he? This notion is further strengthened by Philip's choice of the figure of Judas Iscariot as the prototype figure to parallel Gedalياهو's suicide.

The association of the Jews with Judas Iscariot is not unfamiliar, on the contrary. As Alexander Murray in his seminal study on *Suicide in the Middle Ages* has shown it is exactly at this period (late twelfth and early thirteenth century) that Judas's "Jewish" features became more clear and visible both in literary forms as well as in the arts.²⁸ Murray points to the following three factors as the reasons for this change: the "evangelical awakening" of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, namely the growing consciousness toward the Gospel and its leading arch-villain Judas, the connection between Judas' money and money-mindedness, and the growing tendency among western Europeans to define themselves more articulately as Christians, associated with a sharper hostility towards non-Christians in their midst, especially Jews.

Up until this period it was much more commonplace to associate the Jews especially with Judas's greed, with his willingness to accept the thirty pieces of silver, and with the Jews' part in orchestrating the betrayal and subsequent arrest of Jesus. Our text does relate to Judas's treachery, stating that Gedalياهو took his life in a way similar to that of the traitor Judas (*in hoc Judae proditori similes*) namely by hanging himself rather than by falling on his sword like King Saul (1 Sam 31:2–5) or drowning himself in a river. But if we examine Gedalياهو's figure in the story carefully we find that he is represented as a Jew associated with a different aspect of Judas, a very common one, but at the same time very uncommon to

²⁸ A. Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages: Vol. I: The Violent Against Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 326–331.

Jews in general—the portrayal of a Jew as *Judas desperatus*, Judas that had despaired of hope. This aspect of Judas character is the one that had realized his sin but for his lack of belief in Christ's *caritas*, forgiveness, and mercy designed his own death and set about performing it. The portrayal of Gedaliyah in the story as *Judas desperatus* inevitably raises the question: can it be that Gedaliyah was seen as a potential convert to Christianity, a follower of Jesus and the Christian faith, whose acts of outward defiance came as a surprise to the Christian community, signifying betrayal?

If we adopt this interpretation it would explain a few of the above-mentioned oddities, for instance: Gedaliyah's undisturbed presence among those assembled in the cultic events that were associated with St. Frideswide, a very unlikely place indeed for a young local Jew even though some, like Robert Stacey, have suggested that the church was located in the Oxford Jewry.

We may therefore suggest that in a similar manner to Yom Tov's suicide Gedaliyah's suicide was also a byproduct of a potential conversion, or at least an attraction to Christianity, gone sour. We may even speculate that Philip had written down his version of the events in order to supply his version of events of Gedaliyah's attack on the saint and eventual suicide. These events were, as he himself testifies, recent occurrences and well-known around town. By deeming Gedaliyah mad and blasphemous, Philip could easily disassociate himself from Gedaliyah even if before the event he had somehow been in touch with him. Following this interpretation we may conjecture that while in the presence of the saint's relics Gedaliyah had a sudden change of heart, and what might have begun as an attempt to come in contact with the relics as with the Christian faith in general had changed. Gadaliya's behavior revealed his changing attitude and the expected conversion or interest he had in Christianity turned into defiance.²⁹

By now, after Gedaliyah's act of outward defiance toward the relics of Frideswide all parties involved, Jews and Christians alike, were left puzzled. Gedaliyah himself was most likely confused. He might have made it away from the Christian crowd with only insult but some form of retribution was sure to come. Furthermore, by now his mysterious presence among the Christians celebrating the relics of St. Frideswide demanded an explanation. Thus, upon returning home Gedaliyah repeated his outward

²⁹ Consulting with Hebrew University anthropologist and psychologist Prof. Yorm Bilu, I understood that the mental distance between the two is a very short one.

defiance involving foul language against the saint in what seems to me an attempt to explain his presence among the Christians celebrating the cult of Frideswide’s relics. To his dismay his father did not see his slander against Christianity and the local saint in a favorable manner, as Gedaliyah might have expected—quite the opposite. The father, left baffled by his son’s remarks and realizing the potential hazard this language harbors, rebukes the son’s actions and slander, and, probably in fear of similar actions repeating themselves, he curses the youngster.

It is at this point that the burden became too heavy for Gedaliyah. He probably thought his father would play along or at the very least understand what he was doing near the saint’s adherents. Gedaliyah, perhaps too, in his own way wished to invoke the image of the Jewish martyrs—with their outward defiance towards the symbols of Christianity.³⁰ But his act either did not seem convincing to his father or was too outspoken and fearless—even outright mad. Entering the realm of speculation and returning to the issues of adolescence it seems that the confrontation between Gedaliyah and his father might be the textual tip of a long behavioral iceberg of conflict and previous clashes. In any case the father did not reciprocate, and contrary to Gedaliyah’s expectations he was reprimanded for his behavior and cursed rather than praised. Gedaliyah subsequently retreated inward and the events leading to his suicide began to unfold.

It seems that Gedaliyah may have decided to kill himself in order to prove to himself and to his coreligionists that he was after all not a potential convert, as some may have thought or suspected, but a true Jew or, even better, the ultimate Jew—a martyr.

Due to the nature of the text we hear very little about the inner Jewish reactions to Gedaliyah’s untimely death. This stands in contrast to the relatively detailed report about the posthumous reactions to Yom Tov’s death. There is however the remark made by Philip about the dogs accompanying

³⁰ Some of these Jews, and especially those who Christians had reason to believe would convert, are recorded in Hebrew Chronicles as outwardly defying the sacred symbols of Christianity in the process of their martyrdom. See for example the story of Kalonimus of Bachrach at the Stahlbeck fortress during the riots of the Second Crusade (1146–7). See Ephraim ben Ya’akov of Bonn, *The Book of Memories: Penitential Prayers and Lamentations* ed. A.M. Haberman (Jerusalem: Bialuk Institute Publishing, 1970) (Hebrew). On the language and symbols employed by the Jewish chroniclers of the First Crusade see I.J. Yuval, “Language and Symbols of the Hebrew Chronicles of the Crusades,” Ed. Y.T. Assis et al., *Facing the Cross: The Persecutions of 1096 in History and Historiography* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 101–117 (Hebrew).

the funeral with their howling and the corpse falling from the cart en route to the cemetery in London. The remark about the dogs could be a true fact that Philip was merely commenting on and using in an edifying way to make another moralistic point to his readers. It is not unlikely, however, that due to the relatively long journey with Gedalياهو's corpse on a cart all the way from Oxford to London, the smell of the decaying body could have attracted dogs to follow the funeral procession, howling and barking as Cecil Roth has hinted.³¹ Nevertheless the association of Jews and canines is of a deep symbolic nature.³² Jews were well aware of this association and its negative appeal; they even tried to use this same imagery in a non-pejorative approach in *The Book of Questions* [*Sefer Qushiyot*], a Franco-German Jewish work from the thirteenth century, an intriguing yet rather enigmatic collection of remarks on ritual, beliefs, pseudo-science, and customs organized in the format of a question-answer session. In a sober and subtle remark on this association found in this work the anonymous author refers to this notion in the following remark:

§ 128: You might ask why do the gentiles (*umot Ha'olam*) call us Jews dogs? The answer is for it is written: [Deut. 14:1] "Ye are the children [*banim*] of the lord your God." The word *banim* in *gematria* [the numerical value of the Hebrew characters] is the same as the word dogs [*klavim*] (both numerical value sums up to 102).³³

The Jewish preferred appropriating the Christian slander and turning it upside down, using it as a polemical remark to show the loyalty and close relationship between the Jews and God in a similar way to the manner in which the Dominican Friars related their popular etymology as *Domini-Canes*. In light of the symbolic nature of the reference dogs, could Philip have referred not to actual dogs howling at the funeral but to the Jews (symbolized in his eyes as dogs) mourning and crying in Gedalياهو's funeral, granting him, in a manner similar to Yom Tov, a public eulogy, thus unintentionally testifying to his public rehabilitation? We can only speculate.

³¹ C. Roth, *The History of the Jews in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 13 and n. 1.

³² On this see the recent work by K. Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and its Interpreters* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). Interestingly enough one of the earliest remarks in medieval Europe is a much quoted remark involving Jews and dogs from the English anti-Jewish polemist Gilbert Crispin from the late eleventh century. See Jacobs, *The Jews of Angevin England*, 7–12.

³³ The collection appears in two fourteenth-century Hebrew manuscripts: Ms. Cambridge 858 as well as in the Ms. Darmstadt Stadtsbibliothek 25 See: Y.Y. Stahl (ed.), *Sefer Qushiyot* (Jerusalem, 2007), 100 (Hebrew).

Gedaliyah was clearly a troubled young man; it may even be safe to say quite unstable. It seems that in a way his suicide provided a solution for all parties involved. For Philip the prior, the author of the text, Gedaliyah's untimely death was a demonstration of the retributive nature of the saint, who had failed to do so instantaneously when her relics were mocked and ridiculed by him in the presence of her adherents. For the Jews, including Gedaliyah's family, his death, as tragic as it may have been, ended a situation that might have put the entire Jewish community of Oxford, and the family in particular, in grave danger. Just how grave the danger and how high the anxiety can be seen from the fact that both Jewish bystanders as well as Gedaliyah's father cursed the boy for his actions. The father's curse is of a horrible nature and it is no wonder Gedaliyah took it to heart.³⁴ For Gedaliyah himself the suicide provided an avenue to act in a martyr-logical fashion and gain a rehabilitation and possible indulgence for his thoughts and acts.

To conclude: our discussion has revolved around a few themes: adolescence, religious identity, conversion, and suicide. We have seen two cases of Jewish adolescent suicide from late twelfth-century England. Both cases involved troubled youngsters who had an unresolved relationship with the Christian faith and at some point both were thought of as mad by those around them. In both cases conversion or thoughts of converting from Judaism to Christianity were in the background. By examining these cases side by side and comparing their similarities and differences, I think we can arrive at a much more informed understanding of what drove these individuals to their death as well as how their actions were understood by their surroundings within a wider social context. Behind the scenes of these cases are two closely related but at times contradicting concepts: the ethos of martyrdom and the burden of religious doubt. Martyrdom was ever present in the collective memory of twelfth-century Jews, especially in the wake of the 1096 Crusader riots and subsequent events like the first blood libel accusation in Norwich 1144 and the events of the Second Crusade 1146–7, as well as in the oral and written Jewish culture of the time. The second concept, religious doubt, is also present

³⁴ Moses of Wallingford's enigmatic choice of words when reprimanding his son supplies us with an insight into the levels of anger as well as terror his son's action had caused. I believe that the peculiarity of the father's curse "whatever was to be his destiny at the end of one hundred years would meet him instantly" only attests to its authenticity. As in Yom Tov's case non-Jewish household aides and employees that are later referred to in Gedaliyah's story as well were the ones that gave away the nature of the conversation that took place in close quarters.

in both stories as in the accounts about martyrdom written in the twelfth century as recently shown in the works of Jeremy Cohen, Israel Yuval, Elliot Horowitz and others.³⁵ Religious doubt lurked behind the façade of the steadfast statement praising the ideology of Jewish martyrdom just mentioned. While the sources that tell the two stories leave us with many missing details, Karl Morrison and Jeremy Cohen have pointed out that with regard to twelfth-century narrative writing in general this silence shouldn't deter us from trying to decipher its meaning and role in the texts.³⁶ By putting these two cases in the context of the tribulations of adolescence, the inner struggle with self-identity (in these cases religious self-identity) and the fact that adolescent behavior is extremely unpredictable and at times defiant, we can find the middle ground to help us reconcile how both martyrdom on the one hand and religious doubt on the other live side by side in the stories we discussed. Martyrological ideology serves first as a catalyst for suicidal behavior among troubled adolescents tormented by religious doubt. Later, the same ideology serves as a means for the community to eventually understand and socially process the suicidal act and rehabilitate the postmortem memory of these youths, making their deaths meaningful within their community and enabling the community to accept these cases and other like them without turning the troubled individuals into role models on the one hand or disgracing them on the other.

³⁵ J. Cohen, "Between Martyrdom and Apostasy: Doubt and Self Definition in Twelfth-Century Ashkenaz," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999), 431–471; J. Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); A. Gross, *Struggling with Tradition: Reservation about Active Martyrdom in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); I.J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 92–203; D. Malkiel, "Jews and Apostates in Medieval Europe: Boundaries Real and Imagined," *Past and Present* 194 (2007), 3–34 and more recently D. Malkiel, *Reconstructing Ashkenaz: The Human Face of Franco-German Jewry 1000–1250* (Stanford, CA: University Press, 2009), 114–147.

³⁶ Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God*, 51–55.