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Jewish Culture and Literature in England

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A Historical Context and Cultural Backdrop: Being Jewish in Christian England

The story of how the medieval English Jews lived their lives in eleventh-, twelfth-, and thirteenth-century England intersects with the realities of the Jews’ historical situation. Thinking about the contingent realities of Jewish lives brings us to the Christian community’s view of Jews and the Jews’ own view of themselves and how the Jews themselves navigated the fraught culture of medieval England. A powder keg, of sorts, resulted after the Normans claimed the seats of power in 1066. This combustible site that was medieval England in the eleventh century involved the English (that is, the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and other Germanic tribes) who had arrived in the fifth century; the Norman French who took control over the country in 1066; and the Jews who were imported into England by the Normans (Cohen 2006; 2004; Roth 1964). Each group performed their roles well: the English were angry about their subjugation; the Normans displaced the English and set the Jews to work in assisting with the development of an Anglo-French empire; and the Jews recognized their powerlessness and worked fastidiously in their role of servitude (Edward I 1810, 221a; Stow 1992, 217–18). As serfs, the Jews occupied a hybrid identity that was sometimes-English, sometimes-French, and sometimes-Jewish but never whole, always an “erroneous, inauthentic, not one’s own” (Radhakrishnan 2003, 318).

For the most part, the Jews of England attempted to balance two spheres, living lives of complex identity politics framed by a battle ground between the self-as-Other and the self-as-Jewish. These sites materialized in the global and local spheres, involved the public and the private civic worlds, and resonated as either Anglo-French or Jewish. The global performance of Jewishness played out in the public sphere: these Jews made a living in the Anglo-French economy, often as moneylenders; these English Jews knew the Anglo-French language, had Anglo-French names, and were familiar with the ways of the Christians, their customers (Lipman 1967; Roth 1964; Richardson 1960; Bartlet, 2009, 19).

The local sphere was a private one: these Jews knew Hebrew, had Jewish names, followed the laws of the Jewish community, and found their personal passions fulfilled as writers, “artisans, fishmongers, cheesemongers, teachers, vintners, scribes, household attendants, physicians, goldsmiths, merchants, ladder-makers, fencing-masters, landlords, peddlers, innkeepers, cross-bowmen, ser-
geants-at-arms, and synagogue officials” (Krummel 2011, 46). The combination of a public and private English Jew speaks to the besieged nature of these two identities trying to thrive in one alienated person. This chapter presents the culture and writing of the medieval English Jew.

All the Jews of England encountered some form of the Christian anxiety about the contact between the Old Testament and the New Testament and the New Testament’s reliance on the Old Testament (Moore 1987, 27–45; Stow 1992; Langmuir 1990). Searching for the early beginnings or even later iterations of this drama over and hostility about the close contact between the books of the Old Testament and the New Testament takes us beyond the scope of this chapter, but suffice it to say that Ambrose’s (ca. 340–397) work in *Cain and Abel* contributed profoundly to the lexicon of anti-Judaism (Ambrose 1961, 359–437; Nirenberg 2013). As a case in point, Ambrose’s attempt to dispense with the efficacy of the Old Testament quite likely sets the stage for later anxieties about the English involvement in the Christian world (Krummel 2011, 94–97). Ambrose argues that once the New Testament came into being, the Old Testament became outmoded and that the appearance of Ecclesia and Christianity displaced/replaced Synagogue and Judaism: “[w]hen one number is added to another, something new arises. The original number disappears” (Ambrose 1961, 360; Krummel 2011, 88). Ambrose later clarifies this point with specifics: “[t]hese two brothers, Cain and Abel, have furnished us with the prototype of the Synagogue and the Church. In Cain we perceive the parricidal people of the Jews, who were stained with the blood of their Lord, their Creator” (Ambrose 1961, 362). Abel, by default, represents Christians, Ecclesia, and Christ. Ambrose’s formulation contributes to a one dimensional view of a people as a thing, Jews as “the Jew,” and this static vision entraps the Jews in a dangerous world in Christendom. Ambrose’s argument resonates throughout Norman England and materializes as, at best, a tense relationship that continuously wrestled with reconciling Jews as either “the ‘bad’, current Jew” or “the ‘good’, antique Hebrew” (Bale 2010, 137). The image of “the ‘bad’” Jew, a spectral Jew, fed the fantasy of a dangerous and feared monster prone to abuse Christians frozen in the Old Testament story of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel—as documented in an image from a thirteenth-century English Psalter (see Fig. 1; Bale 2010, 130; Kruger 2006; Krummel, 2011).

Hence, the problem with Ambrose’s metaphor: medieval Jews had not disappeared. In fact, their worshipping practices and lives disturbingly evolved with ritual practices that spoke of a scriptural modernization of standard texts (Cohen 1999, 317–63). And so, Jewish presence created an irreconcilable tension because the practices of contemporary Jews of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries were not confined to the Old Testament or what the Jews knew of as the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh.
Fig. 1: "Cain Prepares to Murder Abel." Psalter, England, ca. 1270–1280. MS. K. 26, folio 6 recto. Photo: Cambridge University. By permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.
Medieval English Jews thus lived in a nearly impossible world to navigate. On the one hand, these Jews were haunted by fabricated images of themselves, and on the other hand, these Jews had to suffer the complexities of a hybrid identity and the inevitable tension that erupts from a state of hybridity (Radhakrishnan 2003; Cohen 2004, 34). Sethina Watson proposes a disarmingly possible third option that both bridges and wed these two possibilities—namely, the reality of Christian “doubt” as the outcome of “living, and believing, in the presence of the other” when “the gaze of a known unbeliever became a vehicle through which participants could observe, and perhaps doubt, themselves” (Watson 2013, 14). Either way, these Angevin Jews, to quote Kenneth Stow, lived a life of “severe Jewish trauma”: perceived as “evil and perversity incarnate,” the Jew both occupied a “firmly defined legal and constitutional status” and remained “the mythical enemy of the Christian polity” (Stow 1992, 4). When this drama between Christians and Jewish identities could no longer be sustained by the monarchs throughout Europe, the rulers who had once protected the Jews turned to expulsion as the final solution (Mundill 1998). England has the dubious distinction of being the first of these countries to expel its Jews (Stow 1992, 281). Even more, a marginal doodle in Matthew Paris’s *Flores Historiarum* [Flowers of History] captures the likely violence of the English Expulsion endured by the Jews of England (see Fig. 2).

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The small amount of writing by English Jews that has survived speaks of a tension that emerges from a “power-dynamic” that rewrote reality in such as way that the
powerless Jews were imagined as having power while the powerful Christians were believed to have none (Bale 2010, 24; Krummel 2009). This chapter brings us to see this challenging world occupied by medieval English Jews.

B The Jewish Ghetto in Angevin England

The word “ghetto” first appears in 1516 (OED). This word refers us to the sixteenth century Jewish ghetto, which was a gated site in Venice founded on “the old iron foundry on a tiny island in a corner of the city” (Stow 2001, 40). A ghetto, therefore, has come to signal a contained site that prevents a minority group from contaminating the civic practices of the majority society (Stow 2001, 40). As a gated site, the “ghetto” figures as the antithesis of free movement and civic independence. The etymological tradition of the word, “ghetto,” thus circles back to the impulse to situate Jews on a legally decreed parcel of land. Such a tradition imperils conversations that adopt a more expansive view of the impulse to ghettoize Jews and the desire to confine Jews to a “quarter in a city” (OED, “ghetto,” def. 1). Strictly speaking, as Robert C. Stacey reasonably points out, “[t]here were no Jewish ghettos in medieval England” (Stacey 1992, 264). Nevertheless, evidence points toward another possibility. Jews clearly felt safer congregating together and situating their residences in close proximity. As Charlotte Goldy writes, Oxford had an identifiable “Jewish district” that spanned “an area of about three blocks by two blocks, along Fish Street between Carfax and St Frideswide Street (Goldy 2008, 136). Most members of the Oxford Jewish community opted to live close to rather than far apart from each other. Such evidence suggests that there was a marked Jewish district—an open or ungated “ghetto.” This Jewish area, however, was not entirely Jewish: within these measurements “a Christian vintner” had established himself and asserted his business presence among this Jewish community and a Dominican priory also situated itself in this same Jewish district “to encourage apostasy” (Goldy 2008, 136; 137). A Jewishly owned house became (and continues to remain) a space claimed by, and remembered for being claimed by, Jews—as the lingering memory of a Jewish house testifies (see Fig. 3; Krummel 2011, 7–14).

In the thirteenth century in England, Jews start to encounter the other part of the definition of “ghetto”: “the quarter in a city ... to which the Jews were restricted” (OED, def. 1). In this desire to establish what will come to be known as a “Jewerye” in Middle English and in fourteenth-century England, the medieval English desire to restrict the Jews’ movement predates the concept and definition of a “ghetto.” The construction of a separate civic space for English Jews suggests that we push back the date for containing the Jews in one physical location. Yet
Fig. 3: "Aaron the Jew's House in Lincoln, immediately below the Jew's Court, on Steep Hill."
Photo: Albrecht Classen.

The actual construction of a separate civic space for the Jewish minority in England predates even the appearance of the Middle English word, "Jewerye." The desire to limit the civic and social space that Jews could occupy surfaces in Edward I’s (1239–1307) 1275 “The Statutes of Jewry,” a decree with an undeniable predilection for constructing restricted Jewish living quarters. Admittedly, the word, “ghetto,” does not appear in Edward I’s decree; nevertheless, Edward I’s decree documents the desire to create a type of ghetto, a “quarter in a city ... to which the Jews were restricted” (OED, def. 1). While the 1275 “Statutes of Jewry” accepts the reality of “Intercourse” between Jews and Christians, this “Intercourse” is overridden by the desire to put an end to any possible cheek-to-jowl living situations: “the King granteth unto them [that is, the Jews] that they may gain their living by lawful Merchandise and their Labour; and that they may have Intercourse with Christians, in order to carry on lawful Trade by selling and buying. But that no Christian, for this Cause or any other, shall dwell among them” [le Rey lor grante kil vivent de marchaundise leaus e por lor labur e kil communient ove les Crestiens per leument marchaunter en vendaunt e en echa­taunt. Mes ke par cest encheson ne per autre nul Crestien ne seit cochaunt ne
levaunt entre eus) (Edward I 1810, 221; Krummel 2011, 35). Since the two religious
groups in England at this time were Jews and Christians, it is evident that Edward
I's decree is imagining a Jewish ghetto when it decrees, "no Christian, for this
Cause or any other, shall dwell among them." Compare Edward I's separate civic
space with the fourteenth-century use of the word, "Jewerye." The Middle English
Dictionary records three uses of the word, "Jewerye," in its various forms: one, in
The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester (ca. 1325); two, in The Cartulary of
Osney Abbey (1349); and three, in Geoffrey Chaucer's (1340?-1400) "Prioress's
Tale" (ca. 1390).

Even though Chaucer sets the "Prioress's Tale" in an elsewhere site (namely,
"Asye" [Chaucer 1987, Fragm. VII, 488]), Chaucer's "Jewerye" embodies what an
English ghetto, as described by the 1275 "Statutes of Jewry," would resemble.
First, the Jewerye in the "Prioress's Tale" is clearly not a gated site and one where,
it seems, Jews and Christians live near, although not next to, each other: "thurgh
the street men myghte rise or wende, / free and open at eyther ende" (Chaucer
1987, Fragm. VII, 493-94). Second, the Prioress initially represents the movement
of Christians as an innocent passage through the Jewerye—"thurgh the street men
myghte rise or wende." But then later in her tale, through the actions of her
character, the litel clergeon, the Prioress insinuates a more unsympathetic display
of Christian ritual as the litel clergeon thoughtlessly compels the Jews to listen to
his religious song about Mary "[t]wies a day" as "[t]o scoleward and homeward
when he went" (Chaucer 1987, Fragm. VII, 348-49). The Prioress's Jews in "Asye"
experience what the English Jews had to endure as they yearly witnessed proces­
sional marching through their area of town while the Christian members of the
community celebrated "feast days and ... wound their way through Jewish neigh­
borhoods in an aggressive assertion of Christian dominance and Jewish subjuga­
tion" (Stacey 1992, 265). Third, the presence of a Christian building, denoted as
"[a] litel scole of Cristen folk ther stood / Doun at the ferther ende, in which ther
were / Children an heep" (Chaucer 1987, Fragm. VII, 495-97), suggests the
presence of a Church where young Christian children would be educated (Courte­
nay 1987, 15-17; Greatrex 1994, 178). The presence of a Christian institution in the
midst of a Jewish community also circles us back to the actual situation with
thirteenth-century medieval English Jews whose synagogues would be "confis­
cate[d]" and "turn[ed] into churches" (Stacey 1992, 265) or, alternatively, when a
Dominican priory is "opened ... to encourage Jewish apostasy" (Goldy 2008, 137).

Chaucer's Prioress immortalizes one aspect of medieval English Jewish liveli­
hood at the beginning of her tale when she characterizes the Jews as being
"[s]ustened by a lord of that contree / For foule usure and lucre of vileynye" (Chaucer
1987, Fragm. VII, 490-91). The Prioress's characterization of Jews being
"sustened by a lord" for the purposes of "foule usure and lucre of vileynye" is both
accurate and inaccurate. Without a doubt the medieval English Jews were involved in the monelending industry. Because of this state-authorized financial business, a fair number of records survive about and of the Jews. Some of those records, such as the Norwich 1233 Exchequer Roll, contain libelous images like those immortalized in “Norwich Moneylenders” that depicts a Jewish woman, Avegaye, and a Jewish man, Mosse Mokke, consorting with a devil figure, Colbin (see Fig. 4).

![Fig. 4: “Norwich Moneylenders.” Issues of the Exchequer of 1233, E. 401/1565, m.1. Photo: Public Records Office. In custody of the Public Record Office.](image)

Despite the reality of such unfortunate libels, though, the medieval records perform a double role of, on the one hand, recording Antisemitic libel and, on the other hand, enabling us to visualize actual Jews living on the ground in medieval England. In this latter role, the records serve as a boon to scholarship by enabling us to reconstruct the lives of Jews that would otherwise be lost (Mundill 2003, 56–57; Bartlett 2003, 117–21). The scholarship of Suzanne Bartlet, Charlotte Goldy, Robin Mundill, and Robert Stacey (among others) attests to this point. While we have to approach these financial records carefully, the financial records do enlarge the narrative about Jewish presence and make it possible for us to trace the actual lives of physically present Jews; however, these records also have the potential to narrow our vision of the roles performed by Jews in the cultural
economy. The records of financial exchange, for instance, make it possible for us both to trace the lives of “pregnant wives imprisoned in the Tower of London at the time of the coin-clipping trials of 1278/9” (Bartlett 2003, 124) and to retell the stories of Jewish businesswomen (see Goldy and Bartlet). Still we must proceed cautiously as we celebrate our knowledge and discoveries. We should be wary of two problems. One, the abundance of these records can suggest that Jews were only involved in the moneylending profession and, thus, innocently obfuscate our vision of the other professions held by Jews. Two, the many records of financial exchange can disrupt our memory of how much the moneylending industry fed into the Jews’ servitude in the position of slaves to the king. Jews were, because of the moneylending industry, Edward I’s “Bond-men”—“whose Bond-men they are” [ky serfs yl sunt] (Edward I 1810, 221a). As Bond-men to the kings of Norman England, especially Henry III (1207–1272) and Edward I, English Jews were enmeshed in a complicated financial relationship with their monarchs. This relationship often framed a Jew’s entire adult life. The 1275 “Statutes of Jewry” sets twelve as the age when male and female Jews will start being responsible for paying a yearly Easter tax of three pence to the King (Edward I 1810, 221a). In fact, the financial records, if nothing else, instantiate the likelihood that the Normans imported Jews to England to work as their financial arm. The moneylending industry in the end only served to promote the estrangement between the English and the Jews who were becoming increasingly associated with money in the role of usurer as the doodle in the margins of Matthew Paris’s Flores Historiarum indicates (see Fig. 5).

Already troubled by the Norman colonization of England and its countryside (Cohen 2004), Jews came to represent all the evils of displacement. In fact, looking backwards from the present makes us see this Jewish libel as a historically unfortunate reality because the lion’s share of the loans are taken out by the “townsmen or villagers” not the “members of the rural gentry” (Lipman 1967, 93). Edward I would also later use these loans and the Jews’ earnings to his own personal advantage (Close Rolls 1925). Living at once double lives of freedom and of servitude because of the moneylending industry, Jews were simultaneously protected and at risk. So long as the Jewish businessman or businesswoman maintained a successful moneylending industry, Jewish businesses were permitted to remain solvent; Jews could avoid becoming destitute and wealthy Jews could offer some financial support to their local Jewish community. Such financial assistance was simultaneously of deep importance to the Jewish community and to the specific Jew because becoming destitute and/or breaking with the Jewish community often resulted in apostasy (Stacey 1992). Henry III was the first monarch to create a solution for the financially destitute and culturally alienated Jews: the Domus Conversorum.
C England’s House for the Converted Jews

Known by its Latin name, Domus Conversorum, this House of the Converted Jews was erected in 1232 in London and in Oxford under the direction of Henry III (Stacey 1992, 267; Mundill 1998, 100). England has the dubious honor of being the “only country, where a king founded a home for converts” (Adler 1939, 281). In erecting a Domus Conversorum, Henry III was responding both to the Third Lateran Council, issued in 1179, and Pope Innocent III’s (1160?–1216) words, recorded in 1213, that—in both cases—expressed a certain desire for more converts to Christianity (Adler 1939, 280).

Henry III’s Domus simultaneously presents itself as a refuge for Jews and as a money-making venture for the crown. On the one hand, the Domus appears to be a sanctuary of sorts for destitute Jews (Adler 1939, 288; Stacey 1992, 270–71). On the other hand, all Jews who entered had to relinquish all personal holdings to the king, and inquiries were held to make certain that any Jews who entered the Domus were, in fact, turning over all of their rightful inheritance and possessions to the crown (Stacey 1992, 267; Adler 1939, 291–93). For embracing Christianity these converted Jews were then recycled and made useful in the English Christian society through salaried positions in the military, the royal household, or in the Domus itself as its Warden (Adler 1939, 294–99; Stacey 1992, 276–78).

The medieval Domus in London remained open for a number of generations following the 1290 Expulsion because despite conversion, the stain of being Jewish was clearly not easily removed. A thirteenth-century image from an English Psalter speaks of the indelibility of the Jewish mark—the mark of Cain, often interpreted as horns atop a Jew’s head (see Fig. 6; Auslander 2011).

Robin Mundill counts thirty-five converted Jews in the London Domus between the years 1280 and 1308 (Mundill 1998, 100). Mundill’s accounting indicates that even after conversion, a formerly-Jewish identity continues—in the Christian imaginary—to haunt a currently-Christianized body. Of the stories of Domus Jews, there are two which are particularly troubling. The first story is of a Christian woman, Susanna (fl. 1200s), who married a Jew who had converted in the thirteenth century. From 1245–1247, the Domus was a place of refuge for Susanna, whose “marriage to a converted Jew had rendered her position in the Christian society of Lincoln an uncomfortable one” (Stacey 1992, 278). Susanna was marked as “the non-Jewess” and lived for two years among twenty formerly-Jewish women and nineteen formerly-Jewish men (Adler 1939, 288 n. 1). The second story is of a Jewish woman who converted in the Domus, left the Domus to marry a Christian from Exeter, bore his children, and then found herself back in the Oxford Domus until her death. This woman’s name is Claricia of Exeter (fl. late 1200s–1300s). Claricia converted in the Domus before 1280, left the Domus in
Fig. 6: "Cain: Marked and Exiled." Psalter, England, ca. 1270–1280. MS. K. 26, folio 6 verso. Photo: Cambridge University. By permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.
1308, and after marriage and raising a family, returned to the Domus in 1356 with two of her children (Stacey 1992, 274). Claricia, a woman who presumably found herself incapable of being able to live among the English and outside the Domus, remains one of the last “surviving representatives of Jewish culture in medieval England” (Stacey 1992, 283).

The numbers of converted Jews were never particularly high but were large enough to be visible and for apostasy to be felt by the small band of Jewish communities. In the peak years of conversion during Henry III’s years as king, there were about 300 Jewish converts in a population of Jews that circled around 5,000 (Stacey 1992, 269; Mundill 1998, 256; Lipman 1967, 36–37). Men who converted chose such names as Hugh, John, Nicholas, and William; popular names among the women converts were Christiana, Isabella, and Joan (Adler 1939, 288 n. 1). As a point of comparison, Jewish women who did not convert tended to adopt Anglo-French names whereas most of the Jewish men kept the traditional biblical names (Bartlett 2003; Davis 1888). When Geoffrey Chaucer was writing, the Domus Conversorum remained a part of the English landscape in Oxford and in London and may have continued its existence all the way down to the seventeenth century (Roth 1964, 134). During Chaucer’s years the Domus was filled with English Jews who were Norman imports. The lifetime of this role for the Domus extends through the fourteenth century. In its final years, the Domus was a place of sanctuary for converts who were emigrating from France, Flanders, Italy, Sicily, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Morocco (Roth 1964, 134; Adler 1939, 306).

D Jewish Men, both English and French: Writing and Recording Their Lives

The Jews living in England were quite likely Jews who had found ways to remain committed to their Jewish faith while simultaneously recognizing the limitations of the laws that they had carried with them in such books as the Mishnah and the Talmud. Simha Goldin rightly points out that these deeply essential books for passing down the Jewish tradition confronted immediate limitations in Europe. Created in the Middle East, both volumes of halakhah—books of Jewish law and Jewish ritual—found themselves in different temporalities and climates other than the ones in Europe (Goldin 2011, 14). Goldin notes that new traditions were created and agreed upon as Jews labored assiduously to keep their Jewish traditions alive and current. The Jews in their separate local communities formed “practical solutions for the situations in which they found themselves” (Goldin 2011, 15). Takanah, “ruling[s] ... accepted by the community” that became legally
binding, were the outcome of updating Jewish ritual (Goldin 2011, 15). Takanah were productive solutions to a changing Jewish world.

The takanah of the Jews of England speaks of worship practices and writings that were well aware of the precariousness of the position of the English Jews in Norman-French society. The most compendious of these visions of the English Jews' version of takanah are by Jacob ben Judah of London (fl. late 1200s) and followed in size by the contributions of Meir ben Elijah of Norwich (fl. late 1200s). A third writer who may have lived in England is Berachiah haNaqdan (fl. 1150s). Each of these writers' work memorializes a different written tradition: Jacob's Etz Hayyim [Tree of Life] captures the unique scriptural and religious practices of Jews living in England; Meir writes what A. M. Habermann has styled Piyutim v'Shirim [Liturgical Poems and Songs] (Habermann in Lipman 1967, 1); and Berachiah records the creative desire that seeks conversation with the ancient fabulistic tradition.

Jacob's siddur [prayer book] was composed, Israel Brodie calculates, in 1287 (Brodie, ed., 1962, Preface). Brodie describes this volume as "voluminous" (Brodie, ed., 1962 Preface) and by all extant documents, Brodie's description continues to hold true. Mostly filled with ritual practices for the high holidays, such as Rosh ha-Shanah [New Year], Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement] and other days marked by the Jewish calendar, for example Purim [Festival of Lots] and Hanukkah, there are also more quotidian practices included in Etz Hayyim such as daily and shabbat worship in addition to the prayer over the washing of hands. Tucked away in this Etz Hayyim are three poems by Jacob and an additional piyyut whose authorship remains uncertain (Einbinder 2000, 146 n. 6; Brodie, ed., 1962, 127–29; Kaufmann 1981, 32). Characteristic of the time, Jacob deploys acrostics to limn his poems (Elbogen 1993, 228–29; Einbinder 2002, 132; 140). Jacob's acrostics also identify his authorship of the poems: two open with yud-kof-f vet, spelling "Yakov" or "Jacob," and one with aleph-nun-yud yud-kof-f vet, which spells "Ani Yakov" or "I am Jacob" (Kaufmann 1891, 32). One piyyut does not include an identifying acrostic that signifies Jacob's authorship (Jacob ben Judah of London 1962, 127–29; Einbinder 2000, 146 n. 6). In all, what is important about these poems, embedded carefully in Jacob's siddur, is their presence: as David Kaufmann remarks, these texts attest to yet more evidence, along with Meir of Norwich's poetry, of the presence of "the Hebrew Muse ... on English soil" (Kaufmann 1891, 32; Einbinder 2000, 149).

Arguably, the English Jewish poet most well-known in late twentieth and early twenty-first century is the thirteenth-century Meir b. Elijah of Norwich. In 1967, Vivian D. Lipman's The Jews of Medieval Norwich brought Meir of Norwich into view. Lipman is cautious, however, about providing any clear-cut details regarding Meir's life (Lipman 1967, 157). In fact, the presence of an acrostic in one
of Meir's poems provides one of the conceivably reliable links to Norwich; otherwise, Lipman finds it difficult to pinpoint one identity to Meir the poet (Lipman 1967, 157–59). Meir's autobiographical acrostic, conveniently graphed in the only modern edition of Meir's work, translates to “I am Meir son of Rabbi Eliahu from the city of Norwich which is in the land of the isles called Angleterre” [ani Me‘ir b’Rabi Eliahu me‘medinat Norgitz asher ba‘aretz ha‘i hanikrat Anglatira] (Meir ben Elijah of Norwich 2013, 47; Krummel 2009, 6–10). This piyyut, entitled “Who is Like You?,” also bears witness to a “now-lost Anglo-Judaic language” with the words, “Norgitz” and “Anglatira” (Krummel 2011, 53–55). “Norgitz” was certainly some sort of “Anglo-Jewish creole” because as Keiron Pim points out in his Introduction to the modern edition of Meir's poetry, “the population at large termed the city Norvic” (Pim 2013, 11). In 1971, A. M. Habermann’s entry, “Meir Ben Elijah of Norwich,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* started a conversation about one of Meir's *piyyutim* (sing. *piyyut*) that Habermann named, “Curse my foe with execration” (1971, 1253). Now known by the title, “Put a curse on my enemy,” as renamed by Susan L. Einbinder after she translated Meir’s *piyyut* into English (2000, 156–59), this *piyyut* without question “refers to the afflictions suffered by English Jews” (Einbinder 2000, 153). Miriamne Ara Krummel goes one step further to suggest that Meir was “[c]amouflaging disturbing historical incidents within religiously figuring rhetoric” as a way of talking about “traumatic memories” that were too painful to discuss without embedding them in religious references (Krummel 2011, 57).

The third Jewish writer that I discuss here represents yet another authorial tradition. Berachiah haNaqdan wrote fables with embedded content about the ways to survive as a Jew in the complicated Anglo-French culture. Berachiah was quite familiar with the Norman-French culture, having probably come to England from Rouen—an area that Cecil Roth believes the English Jews departed from for England after the 1096 massacres (Roth 1964, 6). Norman Golb traces Berachiah’s family to Rouen in the 1150s (Golb 1998, 318–23). Should Berachiah have left Rouen for England sometime in the twelfth century, he would have found a community of Jews whose practices were somewhat similar to his own. Paul Hyams believes that Berachiah composed his famous *Mishlei shu‘alim* or *Fox Fables* in Oxford in the late twelfth century (Hyams 1974, 285), and if so, we can include these fables as yet more evidence of a sort of *takanah* as the animals attempt to navigate their Jewish lives in a Christian sphere.

Berachiah's Fables 24 and 38 echo aspects of the English Jewish experience in the twelfth century. Fable 24 narrates a tale of frogs that have become angered by their king who fails to protect them and cannot articulate clear solutions for survival. The king’s lack of clarity leads these frogs to “transgress the law and change the statute” (Berachiah haNaqdan 2001, Fable 24, 52). The frogs direct
their affections toward a different king who quickly betrays them and “smote
them a great smiting, and maligned them, and hated them yet more” (Berachiah
haNaqdan 2001, Fable 24, 53). Berachiah’s Fable 24 could very well be a warning
to the English Jews not to turn away from adonay (God) and not to be troubled by
a silent god. Given that the Anglo-French monarch does not protect the Jews
either, departing from adonay translates to losing the camaraderie of the Jewish
community and the protection of adonay. Another fable, Fable 38, also evokes the
English Jewish experience that Berachiah himself would have known well. In this
fable a Hare and her family “journey forth and go to a field where there is none to
track and chase us” (Berachiah haNaqdan 2001, Fable 38, 73) despite the advice
to remain where they are. Venturing out, the Hare and her progeny encounter
genocide as they are “tarred,” “smote,” and “desolated” (Berachiah haNaqdan
2001, Fable 38, 74). Fable 38 moralizes that it is better not to move than to move.
The moral of Fable 38 resonates with Jewish history and reminds us of the Jews’
departure from Rouen in the eleventh century and the process of being too-soon
unwelcome in England as evidenced by a series of ritual murder charges in the
twelfth century that began with Norwich in 1144 (Dundes, ed., 1991; Auslander
2005; Johnson 2012) and were later followed by Gloucester in 1168, Bury St
Edmonds in 1181 (Hill 1948, 224; Bale 2003, 130), York in 1190 (Dobson 1974; Rees
Jones and Watson, ed., 2013), and Lincoln in 1255 (Matthew Paris, 1968). As with
the Hare’s finding herself and her family “tarred,” “smote,” and “desolated,” the
English Jews encountered a series of traumas in the guise of ritual murder charges
that were built upon “hatred, hysteria, and self-interest” (Hill 1948, 228). The
danger Jews faced is immortalized in the words of Thomas of Monmouth (fl. 1149–
1172), a twelfth-century religious who writes the hagiography of William of
Norwich (1132–1144), the first boy martyr of England. Framed by Thomas as “the
righteous judgment of God,” an untold number of Norwich Jews are either
“exterminated or scattered” (Thomas of Monmouth 2011, 97). Thomas then nar-
rates the intimate details of the Jew Eleazar’s death—a Jew set upon by the squires
of a financially troubled knight. The knight’s squires “laid their heads together,
and one of them ... was sent to fetch the Jew. ... the others ... hid themselves in
a wood through which he had to pass. When the Jew arrived there, the esquire
leading him on, he was immediately seized by the others, dragged off and killed”
(Thomas of Monmouth 2011, 98). Despite the daily hardships and occasional
traumas, there is—as we can see with Jacob ben Judah of London, Meir ben Elijah
of Norwich, and Berachiah haNaqdan—substance in the writing that has sur-
vived. Even more, Paul Hyams reminds us that “[a]t least nine thirteenth century
rabbis with extant writings ... lived in Cambridge, Lincoln, Northampton, Nor-
wich, and Oxford as well as London” (Hyams 1974, 285).
E Jewish Women, Both English and Jewish: Building Lives

Lamentably, no writing of medieval English Jewish women has survived, but we can reconstruct these women’s lives through the public records; through documents from the Exchequer, and through the shetaroth [Hebrew deeds]. To be sure, the stories we tell about medieval English Jewish women can sometimes seem to be even more spun out of whole cloth than the tales we tell about the English Jewish male writers, yet all of the Jews—whether men or women—involve making important scholarly interventions that forge links out of nearly absent material. As Norman Golb cautions us, “details” of these northwestern European Jewish writers “are lost” (Golb 1998, 326–25). We scholars, therefore, have to look to records and deeds for “clues that, if properly evaluated, make possible a reconstruction” of the medieval Jews’ lives (Golb 1998, 325).

Even as early as twelve years [dzuze anz] women were subject to being taxed in England: “each one, after he shall be Twelve Years old, pay Three pence yearly at Easter of Tax to the King, whose Bond-man he is; and this shall hold place as well for a Woman as a Man [ke checun pus kil aura passé dzuze anz paie tres deners per an de taillage au Rey ky serf il est a la Pasche e ceo seit entendu ausi ben de femme com de houme] (Edward I 1810, 221a). Who were these women who were taxed? The presence of a yearly Easter tax suggests that these women worked alongside men. Recent scholarship interrogates this question. Until quite recently, this field of medieval Jewish studies in England had been dominated by the considerations of the Jewish men in medieval England, but new research has introduced us to the lives of English Jewish women. As a result, there is much cutting edge work being done to reconstruct vivid pictures of these English Jewish women. Scholarship, thus, pays homage to these English Jewish women’s lives in as accurate a way as possible.

Simha Goldin concludes that in the twelfth century, it became possible for Jewish woman to participate in the Jewish community (Goldin 2011, 237). The English records support Goldin’s observation by documenting Jewish women’s participation in the moneylending industry. Sometimes Jewish women ran businesses following their husbands’ deaths, and sometimes the women worked as partners to their living husbands. By the thirteenth century, there were a total of forty-one English Jewish women “dealing in loans or associated transactions” independent of men (Bartlet 2000, 31; 46). Up until the twelfth century, there had largely been two domains—one for women and one for men. Goldin remarks upon an important sea change that occurred in the Jewish male leadership when they became “aware of the central role played by women ... and worked towards
improving their status" (Goldin 2011, 237). One of the outcomes of this improve­
ment involved a woman's legal status in marriage. In Goldin’s words, “the more
significant change was the empowering of the woman by making divorce condi­
tional on her consent. Instead of being connected passively to a man who forms
and dissolves the family unit,” women were given the power and authority to
oppose the man’s desires (Goldin 2011, 238).

Most vividly, two scholars—one American and one British, Charlotte Goldy
and Suzanne Bartlet—have effectively traced the English Jewish women’s lives
and revealed how these English Jewish women ably navigated the Jewish and
Christian civic communities. Charlotte Goldy links historical threads to compose a
biographical sketch of Muriel of Oxford (d. ca. 1253). Goldy’s reconstruction of
Muriel’s life makes real Goldin’s observations. Goldy reconstructs the setting of
the divorce of Muriel of Oxford who was born in Lincoln but traveled to Oxford in
1217 after her marriage to David of Oxford (d. 1244) (Goldy 2008, 134; Bartlet 2012,
44). Around 1240, David of Oxford attempted to divorce Muriel because, Goldy
presumes, David suspected that Muriel was infertile: “the couple was successful
economically but also childless” (2012, 228). David wants a child at all costs and
arranges for a get [bill of divorce] and convenes a beit din [rabbinic court] to hear
the case and grant the divorce. David’s divorce from Muriel is not so easily
attained, however, and Muriel “most likely assert[ed] her right to deny her
consent” (Goldy 2008, 134). David pursues the matter to its conclusion and takes
the issue of his divorce from Muriel all the way to the royal curia (Goldy 2012, 229).
The royal curia grants David his wishes, but in this move David also damages the
independence of the Jewish beit din (Goldy 2012, 229). David remarries Licoricia of
Winchester (d. 1277), and with Licoricia has a son, Asher (b. 1242) (Bartlet 2012,
45–46; Goldy 2012, 229; 240). David dies two years after his son is born—the child
whom he might have divorced Muriel to create. Licoricia, however, lives on for
another thirty-seven years, dying a terrifically horrible and rather mysterious
death: “[o]n a spring day early in 1277, the bodies of Licoricia and her Christian
maid, Alice of Bicton, were found by a woman described as Belia, ... lying on the
floor, having died of stab wounds” (Bartlet, 2009, 109).

Before their divorce and while Muriel was still married to David, Muriel joined
David in operating their moneylending business and oversaw “smaller loans to
women and students” (Goldy 2012, 236–37; 240). Goldy believes that Muriel
traveled in the public civic sphere and finds it likely that Muriel made loans to
Christians, as well as to Jews (2008). This aspect of Muriel’s professional life
represents a second dramatic change in women’s positions in the Jewish commu­
nity. Starting in the twelfth century, Jewish women began to claim a “position in
the Jewish economic world ... in giving loans to Christians, in travelling from one
place to another to deal with financial matters and to protect their financial
interests" (Goldin 2011, 239). By the thirteenth century, Jewish women constituted a "visible" presence in "the pipe rolls" (Bartlet 2003, 113). These Jewish working-women are effectively establishing family businesses and amassing a great deal of wealth, even sometimes landing in the Tower of London because of their wealth (Bartlet 2000, 35–46). Because of this visibility, Suzanne Bartlet is able to bring three businesswomen back to life: Chera (d. 1244?), Belia (d. 1270s?), and Licoricia (2012, 31, 35–47; 2009). Charlotte Goldy, in turn, could not have woven Muriel's tale of infertility and eventual divorce from David without the records of Muriel's involvement in the economic sphere. Likewise, without the records of financial transactions, Suzanne Bartlett would not be able to bring the lives of Chera, Belia, and Licoricia to our awareness. Miriamne Ara Krummel, turning to the shetaroth, retells the story of Belaset (fl.1200s), daughter of Rabbi Berachiah ben Rabbi Moshe (fl.1200s). Belaset's wedding in Lincoln turned into a moment of trauma because of the regrettably nearby death of a young Christian boy, Hugh of Lincoln (1245–1255) (Krummel 2008, 124; 2011, 98–100). Such labor has its difficulties, though. Bartlett admits something that all of us who trace women in the records soon discover: following the lives of English Jewish women is "hard" because the women "often end up disappearing without any final verdict" (Bartlett 2003, 125). Even so, Jewish women were being educated and permitted to conduct worship for women (Goldin 2011, 241–42), which was an epic achievement that compelled medieval Jewish men to recognize "sometimes derisively, but for the most part in amazement and with esteem that there is a female consciousness" (Goldin 2011, 242). And perhaps a less pleasant outcome of the women's developing stature is being recognized by Edward I in "The Statutes of Jewry" as needing to be marked by the Jewish badge—"in the Form of Two Tables joined, of Yellow Felt, of the Length of Six Inches, and of the Breadth of Three Inches" [en fourme de deus tablles joyntes de feutre iaume de la longure de sis pouceres e de la laur de treis pouz] (Edward I 1810, 221a). The yearly Easter tax [paie tres deners a la Pasche], which "shall hold place as well for a Woman as a Man" [seit entendu ausi ben de femme com de houme] served to add insult to the injury of the badge.

F Making England Judenrein

Tracing the lives lived and the texts written by medieval English Jews confines us to a study of the Jews in Norman, or Angevin, England largely because the Jews came in with the Normans (sometime after 1066)—invited in by William the Conqueror (ca. 1027–1087) himself (Mundill 1998, 16). The Jews who had entered into England while it was under Norman rule were expelled from England while it
was still under the guidance of the Norman monarchy. The English medieval Jews, therefore, only knew England under the rule of the Angevin monarchy since the Expulsion occurred while England was being led by the great, great grandson, Edward I, of the Anglo-French monarch, William the Conqueror, who had originally invited the Jews to England. The Jews’ seemingly brief but certainly meaningful stay situates the medieval English Jews in a sort of “oblivion”—a state of being that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen attributes to Meir of Norwich whom Cohen describes as “the poet of a community at the edge of oblivion” (Cohen 2006, 177).

More than Meir, though, all of the medieval English Jewish men and women were situated at the edge of oblivion. Some of those poets, such as Yom Tob of Joigny (who resided in York at the time of the massacre), must have written poetry, especially because York was probably a center of Jewish Studies (Roth 1949, 21; Dobson 1974, 14). Certainly, Yom Tob, remembered as “witty as well as erudite,” left behind some verse, a few religious compositions, and “an elegy on the Martyrs of Blois 1171” (Roth 1949, 21–22; Dobson 1974, 19), but Yom Tob’s narrative about his 1190 march to oblivion in York—if Yom Tob ever contemplated one in his last moments—perished in the flames along with the Jews who sought and were denied sanctuary in Clifford’s Tower (Dobson 1974, 28). There were no Jewish survivors of this night and day. Those Jews who the next morning expressed an interest in baptism met with another fate as Richard Malebisse and his fellow “conspirators” slaughtered those remaining Jews who had not chosen to end their lives in kiddush ha-Shem [sanctification in the name of God] (Watson 2013, 6).

The English Jews were in England long enough to consider the country their home for at least five generations but not long enough to be seen as actual denizens of England—remaining always as Norman imports. In 1290, the English Jews had to face expulsion and were given “less than five months between 18 June and 1 November 1290” (Mundill 1998, 253) to organize all of their goods and to arrange for a safe passage to their next destination. No one has yet discovered a record of the Expulsion edict (Mundill 1998, 254), but the narrative of Expulsion may well have been imagined when “The Statutes of Jewry” was being composed. Dated to 1275, “The Statutes of Jewry” concludes, “this Licence to take Lands to farm shall endure to them only for Fifteen Years from this Time forward [ceo per pendre a ferme ne lur dorra for quinz anz de cet hure en avaut] (Edward I 1810, 221a; Krummel 2011, 29; 36). We do not have incontrovertible proof of the whereabouts of the English Jews after the 1290 Expulsion, but presuming the demesnes of France as the likely candidate for the English Jews’ next locale means that the English Jews had to face yet another expulsion from France in 1306—a mere sixteen years after the English Expulsion (Jordan 1989, 203–06). Robin Mundill lists a number of other possible locales: in addition to
France “some families may have got as far as Spain, Savoy, Germany and even Gozzo”; Jews who faced expulsion but who wanted to remain in the general area “may well have fled to Scotland, Wales, and even Ireland” (Mundill 1998, 255). Either way, until the end of their stay, Jews could not escape an enduring association with an alleged financial acuity that sometimes involved the “unearned profits of avarice and usury” (Tomasch 2000, 248). At the moment of their Expulsion, Jews continued to be represented by the money they had amassed so much so that Edward I was compelled to insist thrice in the 1290 Close Rolls “not to intermeddle with the goods and chattels” of the departing Jews (Close Rolls 1925, x). Of course, there reappears also the restoration of “the pledges of Christians in their possession to those to whom they belong” as a reminder of the Jews’ uncomfortable state of servitude to the king who claimed final control over the Jews’ records of sale (Close Rolls 1925, x). Even more disturbing is Edward I’s use of the Jews’ quitclaims to show favor to his friends. Asserting final possession over the Jews’ sureties and bonds is a gesture shared by both Edward I and Henry III who “reward[ed] his servants, soldiers and courtiers by excusing their entire debt or interest on” the loan (Bartlet 2012, 33). In 1290, Edward I similarly rewards William le Brun and Isolda, William’s wife. This couple benefits tremendously from Edward I’s desire “to show favour to William and Isolda for their good and long service to him and his consort” when Edward I erases “all debts that they may be exacted” (Close Rolls 1925, ix). To the end the Jews could not escape the association with wealth and left England in 1290 sandwiched in between servitude and safety “from Richard I onwards”: the king’s Jews were reassured that they would receive “protection” (Bartlet 2012, 34) if only to enable the monarchs to use the Jews for their own monarchical ends. As the July 18, 1290 Close Rolls specifies, Edward I decreed “orders [to] the sheriff to cause proclamation to be made throughout his bailiwick prohibiting anyone from injuring or wrongdoing the Jews” (Close Rolls 1925, x). Jews were forced to stand by as the king relinquished his friends of their debts to the people who had lent them money.

During this short history of the Jews in England, there was much activity and quite a bit of history-making, so I remain reluctant to depart this chapter by inadvertently subscribing to the “lachrymose school” that David Nirenberg cautions us against in his Communities of Violence (Nirenberg 1996, 90). Instead, I want to leave this chapter with the vision of Salo Witmeyer Baron who quite some time ago, nearly one century before Jeffrey Cohen and Anthony Bale, suggested that we study past narratives with nonstandard lenses, cautioned us not to forget that the medieval ghetto was also a place of community and of Jewish law, where Jews could live and worship as Jews (Baron, 1927; Cohen 2000, 1–8; Bale 2013). Baron liberates Jewish communities from the view that the ghetto hampered Jewish freedom. In medieval England it remains clear that despite the efforts to
erode Jewish belief, Jews did not stop being Jews and began documenting Jewish history, telling Jewish narratives, and keeping Jewish records. Perhaps, the social support system in the Jewerye made it possible for Jews to find some protection and enabled Jews to write, worship, run businesses, and welcome such esteemed visitors as Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–ca. 1167), Joseph [ben Baruch] of Clisson (fl. 1200s), and Berachiah haNaqdan to visit (Einbinder 2000, 150). Whether the past of medieval Jews “hold[s] the promise of some strange beauty ... that the dominant narrative will not yield” (Cohen 2013, 292) or reveal “a diaspora world of intricate, malleable, interpenetrating, and difficult identities” (Bale 2013, 304), any remembrance of the English Jews in medieval England must not neglect to remember that the narrative of “Anglatira” is a classic Jewish story that mixes sadness and joy, defeat and survival, a life that is at once committed to a Jewish past and preparing for a Jewish future.

Select Bibliography


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