

The Cultural and Social Background of Jewish Martyrdom in Germany in 1096

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The killing of Jews during the first crusade in 1096 has been widely discussed in research literature. There is no doubt that the uniqueness of this phenomenon – the readiness of many people to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Kiddush HaShem (literally: sanctification of the [divine] name) and to take their own and their families' lives – constitutes one of the main reasons for the great interest taken in it. The fact is that acts of martyrdom which occurred in Islamic countries – where the Jews did not take their own lives and did not make it an ideological issue – met with a much smaller resonance¹.

One of the principal questions in the study of these events is how to understand the motions behind the extreme acts of the martyrs in reaction to the decrees of the time. It appears that fundamental change occurred in the comprehension of the concept »martyrdom« in Germany as from the 11th century. In mishnaic and talmudic sources, martyrdom was conceived as complete devotion to the Jewish faith and its commandments as far as willingness to die at the hands of the enemy and not to convert to another religion or to violate certain commandments. The killing is usually described as a passive act on the part of the martyr: he is prepared to allow his pursuers to kill him without converting or bowing down to a graven image². On the other hand, in German communities at the time of the 1096 decrees, there were Jews who killed themselves, their wives, their sons and their daughters and were not satisfied until they enacted a special blessing for that act. This phenomenon continued

1) Much literature has been written on this subject. I shall mention a few of the researches that have been written recently and which contain references to additional sources. R. CHAZAN, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, 1987; H. SOLOVEITCHIK, *Religion and Change: The Medieval Ashkenazic Example*, in: *AJS Review* 12 (1987), pp. 205–221; S. GOLDSTEIN, *Suicide in Rabbinic Literature*, 1989; A. SAPIR ABULAFIA, *The Interrelationship between the Hebrew Chronicles of the First Crusade*, in: *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982), pp. 221–239; I. G. MARCUS, *History, Story and Collective Memory, Narrativity in Early Ashkenazic Culture*, in: *Prooftexts* 10 (1990), pp. 365–388; J. KATZ, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance. Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times*, 1961; A. GROSSMAN, *The Roots of Early Ashkenazic Martyrdom*, in: I. M. GAFNI, A. RAVITZKY (eds.), *Sanctity of Life and Martyrdom*, 1992, pp. 99–130 (Hebrew); I. J. YUVAL, *Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations*, in: *Zion* 58 (1993), pp. 33–90 (Hebrew).

2) For Talmudic Rabbinic Sources on Martyrdom, see, for example: M. D. HERR, *Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days*, in: *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1992), pp. 85–125.

for hundreds of years in Germany. It was something apparently entirely opposed to Jewish Law which regards human life as one of the holiest values of Judaism, and suicide as a most serious transgression.

The phenomenon was singular in its extent in the middle ages. A similar one was observed during the great revolt of the Jews against the Romans about nine centuries beforehand but it did not recur as a group phenomenon later on³). For the purposes of our discussion, the question of the extent of the killings and the reliability of the data presented in the various sources are not important; they are subjects that scholars have struggled with extensively. The principal question remains even if the number of those killed was smaller than that recorded in the chronicles of the 1096 decrees, which were written in the 12th century. The descriptions that appear in the piyyutim (liturgical poetry) composed soon after the events and the laws detailed in the memorial books show clearly that the phenomenon existed.

A few of them are known to us from the Jewish legal literature of the time and they and their families can be identified. Evidence from Christian sources, too, testifies to acts of active martyrdom.

Particular importance is to be attached in this study to the lamentations and piyyutim of the important sages who lived and were active at that time in Germany. These sages are known to us through their books of religious law written in Germany at the end of the 11th century. All of them testify to acts of self-sacrifice and killing of wives and children. It

3) However, we have seen that only individuals acted so. It is told that three sages, described as the greatest and foremost in the Otranto community in Italy, died as martyrs by committing suicide. This can be seen from a letter written about the mid-10th century and preserved in the Cairo Geniza. Indeed, the decrees to which they allude are not sufficiently clear but the »active« self-sacrifice of the sages – the taking of their own lives – is clear. It tells of a sage named R. Yehaia »who thrust a knife into his throat with his own hand and was slaughtered like a lamb sacrificed in the Temple«. It also tells of the two other sages who killed themselves and whose death was accepted by God as a sacrifice; J. MANN, *Texts and Studies*, 1931, p. 24. Regarding the nature of the version and the significance of its contents, including the relevant literature, see my above-mentioned article (*supra*, n. 1), pp. 109–111, and the notes of it. Another event was the suicide of Jewish women who drowned themselves as martyrs in France. A Jewish source describes this act of self-sacrifice in 1007 following the decrees of King Robert of France. We do not possess exact and complete details on the historical background of this event. Recently, K. R. Stow has questioned the reliability of this source. In his opinion, it was written in the 13th, not in the 11th century. One of the principal testimonies to this view is a historical anachronism: the mention of a coin which was not in circulation in the 11th century; K. R. Stow, *The 1007 Anonymous and Papal Sovereignty: Jewish Perceptions of the Papacy and Papal Policy in the High Middle Ages*, 1984; see in my book: *The Early Sages of France*, 1996, pp. 19–22, and note 15 (Hebrew). Two more cases are mentioned in the Christian chronicles. The first is of Ademar: the Jews of Limoges in Northern France were forced to leave the town in 1010. According to him, a few Jews – three or four – converted to Christianity, others fled and some committed suicide. The second is of Raoul Glaber who tells of the expulsion of Jews from German towns in 1012, the slaying of some of them and the suicide of others. For more details, see: J. ARONIUS, *Regesten zur Geschichte der Juden im fränkischen und deutschen Reiche bis zum Jahre 1273*, 1902, pp. 60–61; B. BLUMENKRANZ, *Juifs et chrétiens dans le monde occidental, 430–1096*, 1960, pp. 103, 168, 234. But these two events are not at all clear and it is difficult to know from the sources what actually happened. See also the following note.

is unthinkable that they invented them. They confirm the *main facts* related in the chronicles concerning the decrees of 1096.

I shall deal below with two main questions: what was the cultural-social background of these events and how can one explain the change that occurred between the beginning of the century and its end? Various hints that have been preserved in the sources show that at the beginning of the 11th century – perhaps at the time of the decrees – even children of great sages, including R. Gershom Meor HaGolah, converted to Christianity⁴). How is it possible to explain the change that took place in Jewish society from the start of the century to its end, when ordinary people, including slaves and proselytes, agreed to participate actively in acts of martyrdom and kill themselves and their families with their own hands?

The question of the singularity of the phenomenon is not a new one. It arose in principle already in the 12th century soon after the decrees. The answer offered in the chronicles of the 1096 decrees is that it was the great virtue of the members of that generation that led them to their choice and to resist temptation, on the one hand, and to chastise themselves in atonement for the past sins of the people, on the other hand. These people are described as having attained such a high level that no-one could compare with them from the day the Second Temple was destroyed and no-one would compare with them ever.

The slaying of family members has been explained by the deep fear that they would convert, against their will, to Christianity. This was especially the case with regard to children⁵). However, this still does not explain why such a »chosen« and special generation arose particularly in German communities of the time; nor does it explain the difference between the beginning of the century and its end.

In my opinion, the author of the chronicles, whose writing was clearly tendentious, preferred to stress the general willingness of the community members to sacrifice themselves as martyrs. I would be careful not to conclude from this anything about the reality in its detail. Nevertheless, it is obvious that there were doubts as well as different approaches regarding the killing of children. In the 12th century they were clearly expressed in works of commentary, in Jewish legal literature and in the *Sefer Hasidim*. One of the clearest testimonies to the difficulties in this matter has been preserved in the commentary on the Torah written apparently in the 13th century:

4) On the conversion of the son of Rabbenu Gershom see my book: *The Early Sages of Ashkenaz*, 1988, p. 112 (Hebrew). On the possibility that the son of R. Shimeon ben Avun converted, see pp. 89–90 which mention additional literature dealing with the same matter.

5) »And those martyrs who took their own lives and those of their children when they were faced with temptation, because they did not want to rely on their judgement ... and feared lest the gentiles forcibly convert them and the name of God be desecrated by them – all have a share in the world to come and they are perfect martyrs.« Hence, during persecutions, it was authorized to slay children who do not distinguish between good and evil, for fear that they will settle among gentiles when they grow up. It is preferable that they die innocent and not guilty (*The Book of Semak of Zurich*, Har Shoshanim edition, 1973, pp. 57–58 [Hebrew]).

There was a Rabbi who slaughtered many children at the time of the forced apostasy because he feared that they would be forcibly converted. And there was another Rabbi with him who was most angry at him and called him a »murderer«. And he (the Rabbi who slaughtered the children) was not afraid. And the same Rabbi said: If I am right, that Rabbi will die a strange death. And it came to pass that gentiles caught (the Rabbi who slaughtered) and flayed him alive and put sand between his flesh and his skin after which the decree was abolished. Had he not slaughtered the children, they would have been saved⁶⁾.

THE FACTORS THAT FORMED THE SPIRITUAL IMAGE OF THE GERMAN COMMUNITIES IN THE 11TH CENTURY

In my view, seven phenomena contributed to the formation of the idealistic and emotional world of the members of the German communities in those generations and they should be regarded as the principal factors in creating the atmosphere that prepared them mentally for mass martyrdom. All of them help to explain the background of the *active* martyrdom; some of them – the change that occurred in Mainz between 1012 and 1096:

1. A bitter dispute with Christianity and a deep enmity towards it; a strong anticipation of its downfall as a condition for the coming of the Redeemer and the revelation of God's kingdom on earth. The enmity was mutual; many Christians had a deep feeling of enmity towards Jews.
2. The important place that Aggada (literally: legend) held in forming the spiritual, idealistic and emotional world of the communities.
3. The important place occupied by the Book of Josippon in the spiritual world of the sages of Ashkenaz and France.
4. The important place of the piyyutim in worship and in forming the spiritual world of the community members.
5. The strong connection with the heritage of Eretz Israel in German communities.
6. Messianic expectation towards the end of the 11th century.
7. The strengthening of the foundations of the community framework and its central role in forming the character of the community's members (including the special and great influence of the sages).

Following, I shall deal shortly with each of these phenomena. However, in this discussion, it should be borne in mind that the early sages of Ashkenaz who sacrificed themselves and encouraged the members of their communities to do so, did not leave any writings containing their specific attitude towards the question of the halakhic legitimacy of their deeds.

6) The commentary of »Da'at Zekainim« on the Torah in J. GELLIS, *Tosafot HaShalem – Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 1, 1982, p. 262 (Hebrew).

1. *The Deep Enmity Towards Christianity*

In the course of the 11th century hatred towards Christianity and its values grew stronger in the German communities both on the theological and the emotional plane. They were conceived as the deadly enemy of God and an obstacle to the revelation of His kingdom on earth. There are scores – perhaps hundreds – of testimonies to this fact. It expressed itself in various branches of the spiritual creativity of the time, and mainly in the piyyutim and commentaries on the Bible and the piyyutim. The wish to take revenge on Christianity is a central motive in these works⁷⁾. The enmity was nourished by the Jewish-Christian disputations which became sharper at that time. The Christians in their propaganda exploited their success with great force and claimed that the humiliation of the Jews and their political weakness testified to the rightness and victory of Christianity. For the Jews this fact was extremely humiliating and difficult to cope with. It was not without reason that they had frequent recourse to it in the works on disputations and commentary on the Bible and piyyutim⁸⁾. Hence the expectation and prayer for speedy vengeance on the Christian »children of Esau«. Had these Jews or their children converted to Christianity it would have been a terrible and final admittance of their failure. The intensity of the dispute prevented them from doing so.

Unlike Islam, Christianity was also regarded by Jews as idolatry for all intents and purposes. The icons in churches were looked upon as images by the Jews; the various sacraments caused them a strong emotional disgust. It is impossible to grasp the deep intellectual as well as emotional rejection of Christianity by Jews without understanding the force of the bitter mutual enmity between the two camps. The deep emotional rejection can be clearly perceived in the description appearing in the chronicles of the 1096 decrees. Even if they do not give an exact picture of what happened, they reflect the mental state of the generation⁹⁾.

7) The desire for revenge on Christianity has been described as a central motive by Yuval, being part of a Jewish-theological concept which claims that revenge on gentiles constitutes an important step towards bringing redemption nearer. See his above-mentioned article (*supra*, n. 1), especially pp. 34–45. In his view, redemption *depends* on a preceding stage of vengeance. I have not found any unequivocal evidence of this concept but, in principle, he is right in assuming that the motive of vengeance occupies a more important place in the works of the Ashkenazic sages than in those of the Spanish sages at the time. It also occupies an important place in the vision of redemption found in piyyutim and in commentaries on the Bible and the piyyutim. In my opinion, the anticipation of vengeance is to be understood against the background of the bitter rivalry between Judaism and Christianity and the scorn towards the Jews. Vengeance would prove to all the rightness of Judaism despite the great humiliation at the time. This is what the writers fervently hoped for and much evidence of it has been preserved in the sources.

8) For more material, see D. BERGER, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, 1969.

9) Important material on the intensity of this enmity is to be found in the book of Y. KATZ mentioned in note 1.

The *cultural estrangement* between the Jews and their environment also contributed to deepening the religious estrangement. In Islamic countries in the 11th century, Jews were very open towards Islamic culture, especially in Moslem Spain. The Jews wrote their poetry in Arabic; the Jewish elite participated in joint gatherings with Moslems and Jews read books of Islamic thought and were deeply influenced by them. Even some of the books on Jewish law were influenced by Islamic legal literature. Many of the Jewish law books were written in Arabic and Jewish holy scripts were translated into that language. Even some of the prayers and supplications were written in Arabic.

The atmosphere among German Jews was different. They were familiar – though only partly – with the literature written in their Christian surroundings and referred to them in their biblical commentaries and disputation literature. But it was only a superficial familiarity. Compared with the Jewish identification with Arab literary creativity in Islamic countries, German Jews felt a strong internal rejection of intimate ties with Christian culture. Common economic activity led to closeness and sometimes even friendly relationships between Christians and Jews, but the latter remained estranged and distant from Christian religious culture.

Only part of the sources which deal with this bitter dispute has been used in research. Two important sources have not been sufficiently exploited, namely: biblical commentaries and commentaries on piyyutim written in Germany and Northern France in the 11th and 12th centuries. The reason is that they appear mainly in manuscript form. Thus, for example, Rashi's commentaries on the Psalms, as preserved in manuscripts, contain impressive evidence of the force of the enmity towards Christianity and its symbols. I have written a detailed article on this subject¹⁰ and will content myself here with just a few examples.

The phenomenon was a central and most important one which characterized most of Rashi's commentaries on the Psalms. He interpreted *over half of the Psalms* as referring to the gentiles' enmity towards the people of Israel, the terrible suffering of the Jewish people in the diaspora and the future redemption. In many cases he even emphasized that Israel's enemies mentioned generally in the Psalms are »Esau« or »Edom«, i. e. the Christian world¹¹. At times he called them *Amalek* and there is no need to mention to which negative connotation he hinted in this image. Much of this was struck out of the printed versions due to fear of action on the part of the various censors¹².

The »wicked« mentioned generally in the Psalms refer, in Rashi's opinion, to »Esau«. It is illustrative of his approach that even the Psalms which describe the greatness of God

10) A. GROSSMAN, *Rashi's Commentary on the Psalms and the Jewish-Christian Disputation*, the Jubilee Book to M. M. Ahrend, 1996, pp. 59–74 (Hebrew).

11) See G. D. COHEN, *Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought*, in: *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. ALTMANN, 1967, pp. 19–49.

12) Many of them appear in the edition of I. MAARSEN, *Parsandatha*, vol. III, Psalm, 1936.

without any mention of a dispute, were linked by Rashi to the bitter religious dispute with Christianity which was a condition of the complete realization of God's kingdom on earth. For example, Rashi interprets the verse »The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice« (97:1) as meaning the time »when He delivers the kingdom from Esau and his descendants«. The kingdom of God depends on the disappearance of the kingdom of Esau, i. e. Christianity.

Rashi's commentary on the Book of Psalms expresses a bitter dispute with the Christian environment and a deep enmity towards it. Works of research usually regard Rashi's commentary on the Song of Songs also as an expression of a bitter dispute with the Christian people. Rashi's commentary on the Psalms, as preserved in manuscripts, was also written with the same tendency. It is most probable that this commentary was written after the 1096 decrees and if this is the case it would appear that it constitutes a certain reaction to the hard blow dealt to the German communities as a result of which Rashi's close friends were slain. I recently published a new source from the Hamburg manuscript no. 152 which lends considerable support to the assumption that this commentary was indeed written after 1096¹³).

The enmity towards Christianity was not borne only by the sages and community leaders. It affected the masses in both camps. The 10th century is known as the one in which Europe in practice finally converted to Christianity, mainly as a result of the activity of popular monks in the towns and villages. The latter planted the hatred of Jews into the hearts of the masses¹⁴). The ordinary Jew who dwelt in Germany and Northern France in the 11th century regarded Christianity and its advocates as his sworn enemy, religiously and culturally. Due to their great fear of the success of Christian propaganda, the Jewish sages, in their sermons and writings, tried to emphasize the fact that Christianity was God's sworn foe and to mock its symbols which were described as idolatry. The descriptions in the chronicles of women who felt physical disgust at the smells that emerged from the churches and prevented them at the last moment from apostasy reflect a reality close to the truth. In this situation it was most difficult for many community members to reconcile themselves to the idea that their sons or daughters would adopt such a faith and they preferred to die as martyrs together with them.

13) A detailed discussion of this question appears in my above-mentioned article in note 10 in which I quoted the words of R. Shemaia, the outstanding pupil of Rashi who said that at first he interpreted a certain text from the Psalms in his commentary on a piyyut according to what he had heard from Rashi and, now that Rashi wrote a commentary on the Psalms, he saw that Rashi gave a different interpretation. Hence, Rashi's commentary on the Psalms was written at a rather later period. See my book: *The Early Sages of France* (supra, n. 3), p. 382.

14) Much has been written on this subject. See, for example, R. W. SOUTHERN, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 1967, particularly pp. 115–162; J. COHEN, *The Friars and the Jews*, 1982.

2. *The Aggada*

The Aggada occupied an important place in early Germany both as a work studied in the yeshivot and as a source which was regarded as holy and as binding as any other Jewish legal source. The distinction which was made by the Babylonian Gaonim and later on by the sages of Spain, between Halakha and Aggada, was not accepted by the Ashkenazic sages. Sources of an aggadic character, especially those found in the Babylonian Talmud, were conceived as an integral part of halakhic sources and served as an important element in the halakhic discussions of the Ashkenazic sages¹⁵). This can be seen already in the responsa of R. Gershom Meir HaGoloh who lived in the 11th century, as well as among his own pupils and the latter's pupils. This extensive recourse to the Aggada and the Bible in order to draw conclusions on matters of morality, and the behaviour of people in general, was very widespread in the *Sefer Hasidim*, too, which was written in Germany at the beginning of the 13th century; it is no coincidence that they studied Aggada in their yeshivot, wrote commentaries on it and often referred to it when composing their piyyutim and writing commentaries on them¹⁶). The Aggada had a most marked influence on the formation of their idealistic world. No Jewish centre in the middle ages was as strongly impressed by the Aggada as the Jews of Germany and Italy and apparently Provence.

The Tosaphists also referred to aggadic sources in talmudic and midrashic literature in their discussions of the martyrdom of their ancestors during the 1096 decrees. It is difficult to assume that they would have done so had they not known that aggadic sources served as accepted and legitimate material in deciding the halakha in Germany.

In fact, according to halakhic sources, including those in the Babylonian Talmud, not only is a person permitted to take his own life in times of persecution in order to avert severe transgression, *he is even commanded to do so*. There are a number of clear supports for this¹⁷). I shall just mention the famous act told in Talmud Tractate Gittin, 57b, about four hundred boys and girls from Jerusalem who were led into captivity at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and taken to brothels; they jumped into the sea and

15) I have given many examples of this in my books: *The Early Sages of Ashkenaz* (supra, n. 4) and: *The Early Sages of France* (supra, n. 3). See in the indices of these books the entries Aggada and Midrash. Anyone who reads the *Sefer Hasidim* written in Germany at the beginning of the 13th century will see that it too had extensive recourse to sources from the Bible and the Aggada, exceeding that by the Babylonian Geonim and the sages of Spain. The sages of Ashkenaz – more than any other circle in Germany or France – maintained a close connection with the heritage of the early Ashkenazic sages. See what H. SOLOVEITCHIK wrote on this in: *Three Themes in the Sefer Hasidim*, in: *AJS Review* 1 (1976), pp. 311–357.

16) The great majority of the commentaries on the piyyutim still remains in manuscript form. On these commentaries and their importance for the research of Jewish culture in Germany and France in the period under discussion, see my book: *The Early Sages of France* (supra, n. 3), pp. 507–538. On the use of the Aggada, see pp. 366–375, 579–582.

17) I have given various examples of it in my article mentioned in note 1 above, pp. 112–116.

drowned themselves in order to save themselves from this fate. The Talmud states that they entered the world to come. Another source of which they were aware contained the legends of the Temple's destruction which told of the priests who leapt into the flames of the Temple and burnt to death together with it.

Another case is quoted there, following the aforementioned one in Gittin, which tells of a woman and her seven sons. After the latter refused to commit idolatry and were put to death, the mother herself committed suicide. Then »a divine voice proclaimed: Happy mother of children.« This description is important for us for two reasons: a) The woman's suicide is associated with the martyrdom of her sons and is presented as a positive act which was accepted in heaven. This is the meaning of the divine voice which said: »Happy mother of children«; b) the motive of the binding of Isaac in the words spoken by the mother of the sons to Abraham: »You erected one altar, I erected seven«, is also found throughout the chronicles of the 1096 decrees.

If we link this act to the previous one it doubtlessly supports the view that sanctification of the divine name permits and even demands suicide at a time of trial and in exceptional circumstances. Additional sources of a similar nature are to be found. Consequently, the suicidal acts of the German Jews in 1096 cannot be considered as opposed to the halakha but as anchored in the spiritual and idealistic world of early German Jewry and its halakhic sources, the method in which it studied the sources and the traditions that it had received. It is in the light of this criterion that we should judge their actions and not according to the accepted traditions in the halakhic world of other centers and periods. Anyone who regards the various kinds of talmudic and midrashic literature as a holy and sanctified source and reads it simply will reach the conclusion that the purpose of the stories about the people who took their own lives at the time of the decrees is to praise them and tell others to follow their ways.

To sum up, the strong attachment to the Aggada and its values can explain the readiness to take one's life but cannot explain the slaying of children and others. It can however be explained by reference to the Book of Josippon.

3. The Book of Josippon

The Book of Josippon was greatly appreciated in early Germany and had a considerable influence on the way in which the significance of the historical events of the Second Temple was perceived. It was considered to be an ancient holy book. Sources which I discovered recently, particularly in the field of commentary on piyyutim, provide a firm basis for this assumption. I shall limit myself to hinting at a few important facts: Rabbenu Gershom Meor HaGolah copied the Book in his own handwriting and others copied it from him. We know that Rabbenu Gershom devoted his time to copying books which were considered as holy, including the Bible, the Mishna and the Talmud, in order to determine their

binding version as part of the sanctified literary canon. The fact that he copied the book of Josippon shows how much he valued it. Can it be imagined that a sage of Rabbenu Gershom's stature would devote time to copying a book which he did not consider to be holy? It is thus easy to understand how deeply this work would influence German Jewry. If their distinguished Rabbi, »the world's great one«, »the light of the Exile«, »the genius«, »the incomparable in greatness«, considered it right to copy the work himself, it was clear that he attached special value to it¹⁸). In any case, Rabbenu Gershom's act lent the Book a halo of reliability and holiness. R. Yosef Kara and R. Shemaia often based themselves on it when interpreting piyyutim and valued it as a work of the highest historical reliability. Rashi also compared it with the midrashim of the talmudic sages and his words indicate that he too regarded it as an ancient and holy source.

At the end of the Book, the act of self-sacrifice of R. Elazar Ben Yair and his followers in Masada is described in great detail and as an act of heroism. A number of common motives appear in this description and in that of the events of 1096 as described in the chronicles. It is most probable that this is the *principal source* that influenced the communities at the time to slaughter their wives and children during the 1096 decrees. Moreover, Elazar Ben Yair, the leader of the Jews at Masada, is described very positively in the Book of Josippon.

The mass suicide of the people at Masada and the slaughter of their children so that they should not fall into the hands of the Romans was not the only event of its kind that happened in the course of the revolt against the Romans. A similar mass suicide preceded it at Gamla in the Galilee. Josephus tells of five thousand inhabitants of Gamla who threw themselves *together with their wives and children into the valley and died*. There were even more cases of people who took their own and their families' lives during the war against Rome. Hence, this view – that a person may kill himself, his wife and his children so as not to fall into the hands of the enemy and be taken into captivity and violated – is one that was accepted as a sanctified principle among certain circles in Eretz Israel, and perhaps especially among the priests. The traces of various customs and traditions of Eretz Israel were revealed in early Germany, as will be discussed below, and it is possible that in the sphere of martyrdom, too, we can observe an ancient tradition of Eretz Israel.

Accordingly, it is no coincidence that the chronicles of 1096 repeatedly compare the martyrs of that time with those who lived in the time of the Second Temple. This is particularly true of the piyyutim written on those decrees by the sages of the same generation. These piyyutim describe the massacre of 1096 in the same language used by the prophet

18) On the books that Rabbenu Gershom Meor HaGolah copied himself and the great appreciation in which he was held in Germany already in the generation following his death, see my book: *The Early Sages of Ashkenaz* (supra, n. 4), pp. 106–111, 121–191, 132–150, 158–161. Most of the descriptions here are taken from the words of Rashi on Rabbenu Gershom. The words of praise in the Book of Josippon for the work of Josephus emphasize the great appreciation for him.

Jeremiah to describe the destruction of Jerusalem, as well as that used by the Midrash to describe the destruction of the Second Temple. Mainz is even often called »the daughter of Zion«.

True, the Book of Josippon was to be found in Islamic countries, too, and was even translated into Arabic¹⁹⁾ but we see that not as much use was made of it as in Ashkenazic countries in the 11th century. What is more important for our discussion is the fact that, in Islamic countries, it was not regarded as having the same authority or halo of glory as it was in Germany. Maybe this fact explains the limited use of the Book in Germany, too, as from the mid-12th century. This was the time that the teaching of the Spanish sages penetrated France and to a certain extent Germany also and exerted a marked influence there.

Our assumption that the Book of Josippon set the appropriate »precedent« for the Ashkenazic martyrs may be questioned due to the fact that it is not specifically mentioned in the chronicles of the 1096 decrees. But this does not raise any difficulty since the authors of the chronicles do not mention their sources when referring to other works including the Bible, the Talmud and the Midrash even when it is absolutely clear that they quoted from them.

Neither is it surprising that the Book of Josippon does not appear in the writings of the Ashkenazic sages as from the mid-12th century. This was the fate of other books written in Eretz Israel which the sages of Ashkenaz used in the 11th century. The teaching of Eretz Israel was gradually pushed aside by that of the Babylonian sages who gained precedence.

4. *Piyyut*

The piyyutim occupied a very important place in the religious service of the German community. No other centre attached such importance to them to the extent that they were regarded as an integral part of the holy scripts. The piyyutim accompanied the life of the community and expressed the distress of the generation, its thoughts and aspirations. It was not by chance that so many of these piyyutim were written at that time in Germany. They also reflected the daily life of the community. In fact, there was a sort of mutual connection between the legend and the reality. The piyyut, on the one hand, expressed the sorrow and the hope and, on the other hand, had a considerable educational influence on the community. It should also be noted that this was the first centre in which commentaries began to be written on the piyyutim. The exactitude in the commentaries on the piyyutim resembles that in the commentaries on biblical text²⁰⁾.

19) See Sh. SELA, *Two Parallel Stories in the Hebrew Josippon and its Arabic version*, in: *Pe'amin* 45 (1996), pp. 58–70 (Hebrew).

20) I have given many examples in my book: *The Early Sages of France* (supra, n. 3), pp. 507–538.

The piyyutim written at the time, especially those of Rabbenu Gershom, R. Shimeon Ben Yitzhak Ben Avun and Rashi, reflect a strong enmity towards the gentile environment and a fervent hope for a speedy salvation. This is the central motive in the piyyutim of the sages of Ashkenaz and France.

A very important motive in these piyyutim is, as mentioned, the wish for revenge on the gentiles. The influence of these piyyutim – together with those of the early sages of Eretz Israel – was decisive in forming the spiritual and mental world of the German Jews in the course of the 11th century. They strengthened in their hearts their deep rejection of Christianity and it may be assumed that they served as an important instrument in the hands of the sages to strengthen the faith of the members of their communities and their resistance to Christian propaganda and pressure to convert.

5. The Connection to the Heritage of Eretz Israel

The subject of the connection of early German Jews to the heritage of Eretz Israel has been widely discussed in research literature, therefore it will not be discussed again here. Despite the disagreement with regard to its strength at the end of the 11th century, all agree that it left a clear and important mark in two spheres in the course of this entire century: a) the piyyutim of Eretz Israel; b) the religious customs of Eretz Israel. Early compositions of Eretz Israel were to be found in Germany and some of the latter's sages maintained a personal contact with the sages of Eretz Israel²¹).

This connection serves as the appropriate background to an understanding of the considerable influence of the Book of Josippon and the piyyutim of Eretz Israel on the German Jews at that time, especially as the Jews of Mainz regarded themselves as »Jerusalem« and »Zion« as stated specifically a number of times in the chronicles of the 1096 decrees.

6. Messianic Anticipation towards the End of the 11th Century

The Jewish chronicles of the 1096 decrees contain a clear allusion to the messianic anticipation on the eve of the decrees. This anticipation was expressed in the commentaries of R. Yosef Kara and R. Shemaia on piyyutim. Of special interest is what R. Shemaia said of the disputation that he held with one of the Christian sages: at the conclusion of his words, R. Shemaia presents his calculation that the coming of the Messiah is to be expected in 1099²²).

21) On this, see A. GROSSMAN, Ties Between Early Ashkenazic Jewry and the Jewry of Eretz Israel in the Eleventh Century, in: *Shalem* 2 (1981), p. 57–92 (Hebrew) and earlier literature there; R. BONFIL, Between Eretz Israel and Babylon, in: *Shalem* 5 (1987), p. 1–30 (Hebrew).

22) I published this source in my book: *The Early Sages of France* (supra, n. 3), p. 375.

It may reasonably be assumed that this messianic faith prepared the people emotionally for the mass martyrdom. Actually, Gershom Cohen held a different opinion: he did not believe that messianic faith was capable of such an thing since, if salvation was near, why should anybody be prepared to die as a martyr? After all, if salvation was about to appear, there would be a general deliverance also for those who converted to another religion²³⁾. However, I doubt whether this view is acceptable. Whoever converts shortly before the coming of the Redeemer, according to his account, acts in a way liable to prevent his resurrection when the Messiah comes. Apostasy was perceived by Judaism as a most serious transgression in all generations, and especially among the German Jews in the middle ages. There was certainly a fear, according to their ideas, that an apostate's assistance to the enemies of God's kingdom would only be an impediment. The belief that the Redeemer was about to appear could actually influence people to die as martyrs since salvation would come soon, the dead would arise and the reward for martyrdom would be great.

7. The Strengthening of the Community's Foundations

In the course of the 11th century, the number of Jews in Germany grew and the community's foundations were considerably strengthened: the power of its institutions and their authority grew and the power of the sages in particular increased and they enjoyed more influence and appreciation in Germany than in many other centres at that time. In my opinion, there is a direct link between the development and the nature of the spiritual image of the German Jewish communities.

The result was that sages such as Rabbenu Gershom ben Judah, Shimeon ben Avun, Rashi and others caused a deep religious awakening through their piyyutim and their literary work in general and influenced the people's outlook, including an absolute rejection of Christianity. It may be assumed that the conversions at the beginning of the century, especially in 1012 – which we discussed above – caused the community's spiritual leaders worry and they increased their efforts to influence the religious world of their followers and strengthen their opposition to acts of apostasy. Who knows if this concern did not urge Rabbenu Gershom to copy the Book of Josippon himself. There is no real evidence of this in the sources but it is a possibility which is worth examining. It is especially worth stressing the words of the great Ashkenazic sages, which they repeated over and over again, regarding the expectation that Christianity would collapse in order to enable the revelation of God's kingdom on earth. The teaching of these early sages was accepted and sanctified. I have included many examples of it in my book »The Early Sages of Ashkenaz«.

23) G. D. COHEN, *Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim*, in: *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Culture*, 1991, pp. 271–298.

It was these seven factors which, in my opinion, formed the image of the community's members towards the end of the 11th century and which prepared the emotional ground for the mass martyrdom.