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Susan L. Einbinder: Beautiful Death

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INTRODUCTION

THE MEDIEVAL POETRY OF JEWISH MARTYRDOM

[E]veryone wants
What he did to be remembered a long time after
The things he didn't do are forgotten.
—Natan Zach

THIS IS A BOOK about poetry and history, about what people did and how they wanted to remember doing it. It is about poems that turned to passion and polemic in the wake of violence, shaping people's responses to the incidents they described in their own time and for generations to come.

The events in question began in the spring of 1096, when Crusader armies passing through the Rhine Valley on their way to the Holy Land attacked Jewish communities that lay in their path. An outpouring of commemorative literature—prose chronicles, martyrological rosters, and verse laments—for the victims appeared soon after. This literature also preserved accounts of many Jews who, faced with the furious mobs of crusaders and local reinforcements, preferred to kill themselves and their families rather than let the Christians determine their fate. With their defiant deaths, the medieval Jewish martyr was born and, with the descriptions of their deeds, so was medieval Jewish martyrology.

By the second half of the twelfth century, the Jewish poetry of martyrdom formalized an ideal of Jewish resistance to persecution and conversionary pressures. The poems of martyrdom commemorated Jewish victims as figures of exceptional piety and courage who put virtue to the ultimate test and “sanctified the Name” in death. They also reinforced the positive values that might deter attrition, especially among the most vulnerable elements of Jewish society, while drawing ever more boldly the border between Christian and Jew. In so doing, the poems memorialized as heroes the men and women who achieved the poetic ideal while consigning to oblivion those who did not. At the same time, the poetry of martyrdom, despite its preoccupation with heroic deeds, reveals some of the daily concerns and values that characterized medieval Jewish life.

And yet, the Hebrew poetry of martyrdom from medieval northern Europe has rarely been considered a source of information about the

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“everyday life” of its authors or audiences. I shall explore some of the reasons for this below. As a way of beginning, however, let me emphasize that the following studies assume that Jewish martyrological poetry, like the spectrum of martyrological rituals, beliefs, and behaviors that included this poetry, is not solely concerned with the facts of martyrdom. For the Jews of northern Europe, martyrology was not merely a way of making sense of the traumatic events that struck so many Jewish individuals and communities over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Martyrological symbols and rituals, narratives and poetry, transmitted a picture of idealized Jewish *living* as well as a prescription for idealized Jewish death. They also reflected, in part through poems like those we shall be exploring, communal values and an ideal of social order that drew on contemporary non-Jewish models as well as particularly Jewish ones. These values and ideals were intended to be meaningful for a range of listeners, from the highly literate class of male scholars to less learned Jewish men, women, and children.

Their Christian neighbors may have viewed them as strangers, but most of these Jews were the descendants of families that had lived in northern Europe for generations; the landscape and customs of the region had had many long years to shape their mental horizons and outlooks as well as the rhythms of their daily lives.¹ Three twelfth-century sources, all deriving from the school of Eleazar of Worms, trace the origins of Jewish communities in the Rhineland (known in Hebrew as the land of *Ashkenaz*) to a cordial invitation and charter from Charlemagne to an émigré group of Italian Jews. This claim is not taken seriously by historians, who nonetheless generally concur that the legend contains kernels of truth. The arrival in the early tenth century of members of the Qalonymos family of Italy may have been connected to the efforts of the early Carolingian rulers to encourage economic growth in the region. Small Jewish communities continued to take root along the Rhine, the Seine, and the Loire over the next century. Most were anchored in the trading activities of a few major families, the Qalonymos family prominent among them.²

Pope Urban II's call to crusade in 1095 did not include any instructions to attack Jewish communities throughout the Rhine, but in town after town, Jewish settlements were the targets of violence. Although scholars differ in their assessment of the permanent damage caused by these attacks, most agree that crusader and mob assaults on Jewish life and property changed the balance of Jewish-Christian relations.³ French Jews were largely spared in 1096, but they would experience mob violence firsthand during the Second Crusade (1144–47). Moreover, news traveled fast between Ashkenaz and northern France. Since the days of the scholar and exegete of Troyes, R. Solomon bar Isaac (known as

Rashi—d.1105), the schools of the northern French rabbis had gained renown in northern Europe. Their dialectical methods of reconciling discordant talmudic texts and traditions reached its apex two generations after Rashi, in the work of his grandsons R. Samuel ben Meir and R. Jacob Tam and their peers.⁴ During the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many of the leading rabbis of Ashkenaz came to France to study in their youth. The commercial networks of French and Rhenish Jews were as far ranging as their intellectual ones, and their leading families were often related by blood (or marriage) as well. The shock of the 1096 violence, as that of later tragedies, reverberated swiftly beyond the sites of crusader bloodshed.⁵

By the mid-twelfth century, however, mob violence and crusader attacks were not the only threat to Jewish security and survival. From Norwich, England, in 1144, came the first recorded instance of an accusation of ritual murder against local Jews, in this case alleging that the Norwich Jews had murdered a young boy named William for ritual purposes. By the early thirteenth century, accusations of ritual murder began to include charges that the Jews sought Christian blood for religious and medicinal uses. The blood libel became a frequent catalyst to tragedy in Jewish communities, invariably leading to arrests and interrogations, and often confessions made under torture. If the Jews were lucky, a huge fine or ransom could terminate the judicial proceedings there, but more often, such a payment merely followed the execution of the unfortunate accused at the stake. Over time, the murder or blood libel expanded to include accusations of ritual crucifixion, cannibalism, and finally host desecration. Many individual incidents, and indeed the phenomenon of the libel accusations itself, have been treated in detail by historians.⁶ Notably, the Jewish men and women who met their deaths as the result of such accusations were the victims of judicial (secular and ecclesiastical) violence and not the victims of mob attacks. The poetry that commemorates their martyrdom likewise responds to a change in the nature of anti-Jewish violence.

Indeed, Jews themselves—and not just their poetry—responded to persecution in a variety of ways. Some never gave in, remaining Jews despite increasing antipathy from their neighbors, economic instability, and actual violence. Under relentless economic, spiritual, and physical pressure, some converted to Christianity. Most Jewish men and women, until confronted with the stark choice between conversion and death, continued to adapt and to struggle to survive. People married and had children, ran businesses, studied and prayed. Some wrote ledger notes and some wrote talmudic commentaries or poems. Some acquired great learning and wealth, and others never did. Everywhere about them were the signs of a cultural renaissance, characterized by new forms of litera-

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ture, music, art and fashion, new methods of scholarship and increasingly efficient methods of administration. Medieval Jews participated in these changes as well, benefiting from some of them, absorbing others unconsciously, and earning greater visibility and vulnerability as a result of still others. It is no coincidence that when Louis IX and his followers thought of France as a holy and chosen nation, the Jews of the royal domain likewise considered themselves an exemplary and holy Jewish community whose fate would signify sanctity to future generations.⁷

Even when they might seem most to be at odds with it, medieval Jews were woven securely into the fabric of the institutional, intellectual, and social tapestry of Christian-dominated Europe. And yet, unlike scholars of medieval Jewish life and culture in Muslim lands, the scholars who have studied Jewish communities and literature from medieval Ashkenaz and northern France have tended to treat their subject matter in isolation from developments in the surrounding world. Thus, for instance, they have explained the rise of Hebrew martyrological literature in this period—after a millennium of no martyrological writing at all—as a revival of rabbinic motifs and traditions, resuscitated in times of persecution. The rabbinic precedents available to medieval Jewish writers are certainly of interest to our study. For a Jewish author in twelfth- or thirteenth-century northern Europe, these precedents were few but notable. They included the rabbinic descriptions of the “Ten Martyrs” of the Hadrianic persecutions of the second century and medieval Hebrew translations of some of the martyrological legends to be found in Josephus and the books of Maccabees, including the legend of Hannah (or Miriam) and her seven sons.⁸

No doubt the medieval authors drew on these traditions, many of which echo in their works. But it would distort the meaning of the medieval genre to treat it solely as a derivation of ancient motifs. Even if rabbinic precedents could entirely explain medieval Jewish martyrological composition, those precedents have traveled far from their original settings. So if, for instance, being burned with one’s book was a martyrological ideal with deep Jewish roots, locating and describing the roots does not account fully for the leaves and branches that emerged once those roots were transplanted to medieval soil. The ancient precedent has become entwined with contemporary motifs and attitudes: A belief in the incombustibility of a sacred book or righteous person owed much to contemporary Christian models of sanctity and beliefs. So, too, a lament addressed to a personified book, such as that written by Meir of Rothenburg following the burning of the Talmud in 1242, does not just represent an innovative extension of these same rabbinic legends. Rather, Meir’s poem must be understood in its social and literary context. What do we know about other poems that describe book burnings (and hence,

the phenomenon of book burning itself)? And what do we know about contemporary poems that addressed personified objects or idealized feminine figures (from Guinevere to the Virgin)?⁹ The importation of courtly language and imagery into Jewish martyrology raises other questions. What are we to make of a Jewish martyrological lament in Old French, for instance, that describes one martyr's death with a phrase from the *Chanson de Roland*? Clearly, the identification of rabbinic sources used in medieval martyrological poems provides only one piece of a much larger puzzle.

That martyrological literature responded to contemporary ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and modes of representation should come as no surprise. The innovations of *peshat* exegesis associated with the school of Rashi, his sons-in-law and grandsons, reflect the interest in narrative sequence and dialectic characteristic of twelfth-century Christian exegesis and narrative prose.¹⁰ The compendiums of Jewish religious rulings known as *responsa* contain many anecdotes and formulations that illustrate the intersection of Jewish and Christian lives, at times also testifying to a lively sense of narrative style. While some of these intersections were marked by suspicion and hostility, others document a remarkable and often intimate weave of familiarity and interdependence. Similarly, homiletic and didactic texts preserve sermonic exempla and moral tales that illustrate the concerns of Jewish society but also its conscious and unconscious absorption of cultural motifs (both popular and elite) from Christian neighbors.¹¹

One sign of the impact of cultural developments on Jewish medieval writers in Germany and northern France was the appearance of Hebrew prose. Rhymed prose narratives, known as *maqamat* (singular: *maqama*) had been a feature of Hebrew belles lettres in the East and in Spain for a while. With the exception of a few works like the *Megillat Ahima'atz*, the *Sefer Yosippon*, or the parodic account of the life of Jesus known as the *Toldot Yeshu*, however, narrative prose was not among the genres pursued by medieval Jewish authors in northern Europe. Hence, part of the significance of the three Hebrew chronicles of First Crusade attacks lies in their use of prose. What, however, was done with the prose chronicles, which survive in a unique and battered manuscript copy, is not clear. Gerson Cohen believed they were used as liturgical commentaries on the martyrological laments they often framed, although there is no record of their having served this purpose.¹² It is just as possible that they were school texts, as we find was true of the combined prose and verse format in Latin instructional texts of the time.¹³ Whatever their use, the emergence of Hebrew prose cannot be explained purely as a literary response to persecution. As students of the vernacular literatures know, the rhymed prose romances of the twelfth century, like the prose historical chronicles and the written *chanson de geste* cycles in the thirteenth, or the

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shift in vernacular hagiography from verse to prose, are all hallmarks of this extended period. Jews who thought in Old French expressed themselves in ways shaped by common narrative conventions; it was no large step to import narrative prose into Hebrew.

From this perspective, the more interesting question is not why medieval northern European Jews wrote narrative prose, but why they did not write more of it.¹⁴ The answer must be that in some way, their poetry told them what they wanted to know. Yet, perhaps because of the relative commonness of prose in the modern West, modern scholars have lost sight of the fact that poetry remained the dominant medium for martyrological writing among medieval northern European Jews. Indeed, the vast majority of medieval Jews encountered martyrological texts in the synagogue—that is, as liturgical poetry—and not in prose at all. This is one reason that the corpus of martyrological poetry treated in this book is important for understanding the range and depth of martyrological concepts among medieval Jews. At the same time, this corpus provides an opportunity to assess the role of the martyr-figure in communicating social and religious ideals (some of which had little to do with martyrdom *per se*) and in mediating their conflicting or contradictory aspects.

Hebrew martyrological poetry has not received much attention as *poetry*, for a number of reasons. Some have to do with aesthetics, some with genre and historiography. In the first case, most scholars have not thought of this poetry as very “good” literature. In contrast to Hebrew poetry from medieval Spain and other Muslim lands, elegance is rarely a term used to describe the poetic compositions authored in northern France and the Rhineland. The dazzling literary accomplishments of medieval Spanish Jewry are well known, and have aptly earned the period the title of a Golden Age. At the same time, the standards set by this poetry for aesthetic excellence reflect many of the ideals of beauty and streamlined elegance appreciated by Western readers—euphony, regularized metrical patterns (derived from Arabic prosody) and clear block composition with a single rhyme or stanzaic compositions with multiple rhymes, often with refrains. The language of Andalusian Hebrew poetry, in conformity with its writers’ belief in the stylistic sublimity of the Hebrew Bible, is almost entirely biblical and readily comprehensible to any reader familiar with that text.¹⁵ Perhaps just as significant was the fact that a good proportion of medieval Hebrew verse from Spain was secular, touching on themes of love and praise, wine, wisdom, and satire. The Andalusian Jewish courtier-poet and his wry yet graceful verse suited Enlightenment notions of art and beauty well.

In contrast, Hebrew verse from northern France and Ashkenaz was never, in the ordinary sense of the word, secular; the few surviving exemplars of Hebrew secular poetry from this region and period are noted

more as curiosities than as art.¹⁶ For the most part, Hebrew poetry from medieval northern Europe is liturgical, and it drew largely on models inherited from Jewish writers in the Byzantine East, who favored metrically irregular and formally baroque styles. Sometimes the verses of this poetry are organized by verbal stress patterns and acrostics, sometimes by a regular number of words or syllables per line. Occasionally the French and Ashkenazic poets attempted to imitate the quantitative metrical patterns of Andalusian verse. Indeed, the poets associated with the Tosafist schools of northern France seem to have had a predilection for experimenting with Spanish meters and verse forms. This interest in importing fashionable new verse models testifies to Tosafist awareness of intellectual trends in neighboring Spain and is yet another mark of the openness of the Tosafist circles to innovation.

Many of these efforts produced erratic results, leading scholars to conclude that somehow the poets were “unable” to grasp the new technique. Why men who could work with the exceedingly complex verse forms inherited from the East might be unable to grasp the principle of counting syllables is not a question that seems to have occurred to these scholars. What is at stake here, however, must not be a matter of skill so much as one of stylistic preference. The melody of the texts must also have exerted a force on the meter of the verses, and unfortunately the melodies of the texts are lost. It seems unlikely that the Arabic music that accompanied Andalusian Hebrew lyrics, and which reinforced their quantitative prosody, was sung in Cologne or Orléans. The prosodic efforts of the Tosafist poets surely tapped indigenous musical traditions, according to which regular meters may have been unnecessary.

Another difficulty posed by most Ashkenazic liturgical composition, like its Eastern models, is its reliance on rabbinic as well as biblical Hebrew, with a concomitant fondness for neologisms and abstruse allusions. The disparaging comments of Abraham Ibn Ezra, the twelfth-century Spanish exegete and poet, about the verses of Eleazer bar Kallir, one of the great *paytanim* (singular: *paytan*, a writer of *piyyut*, or liturgical poetry), indicate that the Andalusian Jewish elite had little appreciation for the old style of poetry.¹⁷

In this regard, too, the Spanish standard was upheld by later scholars, beginning with the nineteenth-century German-Jewish philologists who assembled and edited the works of the great Golden Age poets. In general, late nineteenth-century scholars, engaged in their own struggles for cultural and national definition, projected a utopian vision of *convivencia* and sublimity onto their reconstruction of Jewish life and literature in Muslim Spain.¹⁸ These same scholars, furthermore, expressed greater enthusiasm for vernacular writing, with its implications of national consciousness, than for writing in literary tongues. In this context, the fate of

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a unique pair of poems from the late thirteenth century is telling. An otherwise unknown Jewish poet, Jacob bar Judah of Lorraine, composed two laments for the martyrs of Troyes burned in 1288, one in Hebrew and one in Old French. Respected scholars like Ernest Rénan and Arsène Darmesteter praised the vernacular poem lavishly, while pronouncing the Hebrew “one of the least bad” of its type.¹⁹

In sum, an aesthetic bias has prevented scholars from seeing the liturgical poetry from Rhenish or northern French communities as either beautiful (meriting attention for its literary excellence) or cultured (defined largely as a secular term).²⁰ This bias was reinforced by an underlying sense that communities under siege could hardly have been characterized by a thriving or vital degree of interaction with the cultural developments around them. Certainly persecution and social disruption are not recipes for flourishing literary creativity. But we would do well to remember that violence against the Jewish communities of northern Europe was sporadic and rarely dealt a deathblow to an entire local population. In the end, the systematic policies of harassment, repression, and ultimately expulsion had more of a deleterious effect than isolated outbreaks of violence on literary and cultural activity.²¹

Significantly, much of the period that concerns us is renowned among Western scholars for its remarkable literary and cultural activity, both in the intellectual centers of the French universities and in the lively courts of the French aristocracy. At least three of the incidents discussed in detail in this book took place in important cultural centers—Blois, Troyes, and Paris, all known for their literary accomplishment. This is one reason this book focuses on northern France, the region associated with the vernacular and cultural flowering known as the twelfth-century renaissance. And yet, until recently, scholars of Jewish history have persisted in viewing thriving Jewish communities as insulated from the developments and ideas so inextricably a part of their environment. In the spirit of the recent work that has sought to redress this insular perspective, this book assumes that Hebrew martyrological literature offers evidence of a high degree of Jewish engagement with the stylistic trends and thematic preoccupations attested in Christian literature and life.

Medieval Hebrew poetry from northern Europe poses a number of challenging questions. One, related to its language and style, concerns its medieval audience. A study that is restricted to texts alone can draw only tentative conclusions about the impact of martyrological literature and thought on Jews outside the circle of a skilled group of readers. One of the claims of this book is that changes in the literary conventions that characterize Jewish martyrological poetry reflect changes in the historical conditions of persecution and Jewish perception of and response to those conditions. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the audience capable of

deciphering the texts of the poetry remains more or less consistent—male, highly literate graduates of the Tosafist schools of northern France and Ashkenaz.²²

For this audience, questions of theophany and covenant, religious authority and obedience, election and suffering, had meaning within a context and vocabulary shaped by centuries of textual tradition. Within this linguistic system, variations in an anticipated convention, or mutations in conventions over time, offer clues to changes in cultural attitudes. To some extent, advances in the study of Christian hagiography in this period are helpful, because (among other things) they document trends and motifs in the dominant culture. It is also helpful to remember that the text of the martyrological poem, rather like a disinterred skeleton, preserves only the outlines of its medieval life. We must look elsewhere to imagine its flesh and motion in a living world.

In other words, although modern scholars have tended to look upon the poetic laments chiefly as texts, for the medieval Jew texts were only one strand of a densely textured experience. Many of these poems come down to us with indications that they were to be inserted in liturgical ceremonies for penitential fast days; some still supply the names of the melodies (unfortunately lost) to which they would have been sung. To borrow from Clifford Geertz's formulation, the liturgical performance of these martyrological hymns offered "not only models *of* what to believe but also models *for* the believing of it." In other words, martyrological ritual embodied a type of dramatic performance through which "men [might] attain their faith as they portray it."²³

From this perspective, the poetry of martyrdom appears as part of a rich symbolic system that wrestled with the disjunction of theological claims and historical realities faced by northern European Jews in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. How could medieval Jews in France, England, and Germany reconcile their profound certainty in their righteousness and election in the face of daily humiliation and persecution, even death at the hands of their foes? How could the attractions of Christian culture be acknowledged while remaining vigilant to its dangers? And on yet another level, how could the leaders and institutions of the Jewish community maintain authority while combatting defection from their own elite ranks? All of these concerns find an echo in the martyrological poetry, and in the evolving ways in which it represented the ideal martyr and his or her death.²⁴

At the same time, it should be emphasized that if the martyr of the commemorative laments was a powerful symbol in medieval Jewish life, the martyr him- or herself was quite real.²⁵ Indeed, if medieval Jewish martyrology shared a number of overlapping ideals, concerns, and stylistic techniques with its contemporary Christian analogue, in this respect

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it operated under a condition uniquely its own. The Christian martyrological literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries valorized the faith of Christian heroes of the Roman past. Jewish martyrology responded to present events. In some form, listeners recognized and mourned the men and women it memorialized as real people who had existed outside the texts. As we shall see, the tendency of late twelfth-century poetry to depict the idealized martyr as a scholar and religious authority diverged from the commitment of the 1096 poetry to a demographically diverse representation of the victims of anti-Jewish violence. I understand this change in emphasis as one way to reinforce images of religious authority. The following chapters claim also that the ideal of the scholar-martyr reflects the concern of the scholarly poets for their young students, who were primary targets for Christian conversionary efforts and too often susceptible to them. How this poetry worked, in other words, and what it sought to do, are the kinds of questions this book asks.

Yet another obstacle that has hindered appreciation of the Hebrew martyrological laments originates with scholars of history and not literature. Historians have not traditionally been concerned with aesthetic arguments, but with recovering evidence toward the reconstruction and understanding of past events. To this end, they have turned to both the prose and poetic accounts of persecution, plundering these texts for “facts.” In the case of the prose, which looks more like a narrative record of events than does poetry, historians have tended to read medieval accounts of persecution and martyrdom as if they were documentary records. In this regard, scholars have often forgotten that realism, too, is a style, and one favored by twelfth-century writers, especially in prose. The description of a woman martyr who spits upon her accusers (or at a crucifix) may, for instance, appear to be a realistic stroke of portraiture. But the discovery of the same description in several sources ranging over a century and a half suggests that the writers have invoked a literary topos. Or, as another example, the overwhelming presence of married and pregnant women martyrs in Jewish texts may reveal less about Jewish demographics than about a Jewish feminine ideal—one in sharp, perhaps even polemical, contrast to the virgin saints and martyrs of Christianity.²⁶

To say that even the prose accounts of persecution and martyrdom rely on literary conventions that shape their presentation of “facts” does not imply that the medieval authors were fabricating events that never happened; artistic shaping is not the same as fictionalization.²⁷ Rather, the medieval writers described the traumatic events whose memory they wished to preserve by highlighting certain elements and suppressing others, in keeping with the meaning they wished to attribute to those

events and to convey to their listeners. By suggesting that a focus on some of the literary features of the martyrological poetry might be helpful, I am not seeking to remove these poems from the domain of history so much as to provide a new perspective from which to view them.²⁸

Undoubtedly, the near extinction of European Jewry in the mid-twentieth century has made more plausible the kind of determinist reading in which medieval persecutions seem seismic and anticipatory echoes of the cataclysm to come.²⁹ But even in the late nineteenth century, as mentioned above, a specific view of Jewish history colored what historians sought to find in the medieval texts they had to hand. For scholars of medieval Christian Europe—in contradistinction to what transpired in Muslim lands—“culture” was ineluctably a response to persecution, perhaps exclusively a function of persecution. The great historian Salo Baron would later dismiss this theory of culture as the so-called lachrymose conception of Jewish history.³⁰ In the case of the martyrological corpus, the implications are clear. Many of the editions of medieval martyrological poetry and prose date to either the period when the “lachrymose” theory was formulated (in the late nineteenth century) or to the middle years of the twentieth century, when it seemed to be proven. As a consequence, certain modern scholars, who are (quite correctly) interested in positing a more balanced and nuanced account of medieval Jewish cultural developments, have been hesitant to pay undue attention to martyrological texts. Yet this reluctance, I think, over-reads this literature’s focus on martyrdom—as if war stories were exclusively about war, and not about heroism and meaning in pacific settings as well. The renaissance in hagiographical studies over the last quarter century surely has bearing on this question, and offers hope as well as promise.

In any event, the martyrological literature exists, and represents a literary corpus treasured by medieval European Jews in their own time, long before it would serve Jews in other centuries with other needs. It is part of a full spectrum of literature and life, some of it lived in the shadow of great tribulation, but all of it bearing witness to a remarkable blend of cultural tastes and trends. Not a single listener to Jacob bar Judah’s Old French lament for the martyrs of Troyes would have rejected—or misunderstood—the poet’s description of a *bele qedushah*, a “beautiful martyrdom.” Perhaps more than any phrase preserved among the martyrological laments, this hybrid expression encapsulates the unique synthesis of medieval French-Jewish life. Unselfconsciously, the expression mingles values from vernacular and holy languages, secular and sacred worlds, Christian and Jewish traditions. Jews up until our own day have revered the ideal of pious martyrdom, and sometimes they have emulated it. But only in Capetian France, in the heart of the vernacular renaissance that

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brought deeds of glory and love from the courts of kings and queens to the taverns, would they call “beautiful” the death of those who died for their love of God.

The following studies focus on different aspects of the issues mentioned. The first chapter is introductory, while chapters 2 through 5 move in chronological order through a series of specific incidents that were commemorated by martyrological laments. Chapter 6 also treats an incident of Jewish martyrdom, but one for which there is no Jewish record, only a Christian one; however, the Christian documents in this case may inadvertently preserve evidence of a literary motif found in Jewish martyrological writing. Briefly, chapter 1 provides an overview of the place of martyrological poetry in medieval Jewish society. In this chapter, I claim that this poetry was one aspect of a multifaceted response of the rabbis to persecution and to conversionary pressures. In fact, the stylistic features and some of the motifs in Hebrew martyrological poetry suggest that its textual matter targeted an audience characterized by a high level of linguistic sophistication and a high susceptibility to images of vulgarity and pollution. That audience would likely have been comprised of the adolescent and young male students of the Tosafist schools. The martyrological laments also show signs of change over time, so that the earlier poems commemorating victims of judicial violence, such as the laments for the Blois martyrs of 1171, construct determined portrayals of martyrdom in ways calculated to overlay images of death with associative images of covenantal renewal. As the cumulative and disruptive effects of persecution took their toll, these associative images give way in the poetry to images of personal transfiguration in the agony of death.

Chapter 2 treats the seven known laments for the martyrs of Blois (1171), which mark the emergence of an important martyrological motif. The Blois poems contain the first poetic reference to a Jewish belief in the martyr’s immunity to flame and offer an opportunity to examine the early use of this motif, which will recur in later poetry and episodes, although its significance changes over time.

Chapter 3 was originally conceived to cover a gap in the number of martyrological poems from northern France that could definitively be assigned to the first half of the thirteenth century. There are many good reasons for the dearth of martyrological texts from this period and region, beginning with the instability of Jewish life in France following the return of French Jews after the expulsion of 1182–98. The periodic conflagration of Jewish books after the condemnation and burning of the Talmud in 1242 did not improve conditions for preserving Hebrew literature. As a striking lament to survive from France in this period, Meir of Rothenburg’s 1242 lament for the burning of the Talmud seemed a promising anchor for a study, especially as it draws on a number of martyrological

conventions. Significantly, when Meir wrote this lament, he was still a young student in Paris, and hence an ideal representative of the group chapters 1 and 3 posited as the primary audience of martyrological poetry. Moreover, although this poem has been treated as *sui generis*, it pays homage to major themes in contemporary Jewish and Christian literature, from beloved ladies to burning books. Thus this chapter evolved into a study of the cultural and literary context of this lament as a way of assessing the worldview of the young Tosafist students.

One of the deterrents to scholars who would like to make use of the hundreds of martyrological poems to survive from this period is their highly stylized presentation of events. Without supplementary documentation from other, nonpoetic, sources, it is often difficult to decipher the kinds of details that historians, even literary historians, seek in order to make sense of their texts. In chapter 4, I use the example of one such poem to discuss some of the methodological problems that arise in treating this poetry, and the effect that conversion at its peak had on the literary conventions of the poems and hence on the sensibilities of their audience. The lament that forms the center of this discussion is a commemorative poem for a martyr named Samson, who was burned in Metz in 1276.

Chapter 5 returns to a specific incident of human martyrdom, the burning of thirteen Jews in Troyes in 1288, for which we have five martyrological laments and fragments of external documentation. In this chapter, I return to the available historical evidence to try to better understand the context of the libel accusation that led to the arrest and execution of the Troyes Jews, as well as to the rich poetic corpus the episode inspired. Here, again, we see the image of the fireproof martyr, albeit in changed significance from its use in the Blois laments. And because the Troyes laments include an Old French lament for the martyrs, we can compare the development of martyrological conventions in Hebrew with their expression in the vernacular. Chronologically, the Troyes laments also mark a later moment in northern French Jewish life, after the midcentury peak in conversion but amid other signs of disintegration.

Chapter 6 treats an incident that took place only two years after the burning in Troyes, focusing on the first recorded incident of a host desecration libel, at Paris in 1290. In the spring of 1290, a Parisian Jewish moneylender named Jonathan was accused of torturing a eucharistic host acquired from a desperate woman client, and he was burned at the stake. Jonathan's story has been amply treated by historians.³¹ What has been ignored, however, is a strange request made by the condemned Jew when he was brought to the stake. According to a Christian chronicler writing soon after the event, Jonathan surprised his executioner by asking to be

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burned with his book—a book, he claimed, that would make him incombustible. The book was retrieved by the Christian authorities, bound to Jonathan and both set aflame. The man and his book burned to ashes.

Jonathan's story preserves motifs that are woven throughout this book, where the fates of burning books and burning men and women have intersected in several chapters. The curious request directs us to a variety of ancient and medieval Jewish texts as well as beyond them, to ask how martyrological beliefs influenced the thinking—and action—of ordinary Jews.

Hopefully, together these studies will help us to reconstruct something of the world in which a Jewish poet could name the ideal of a *bele qedushah*, a beautiful death, and his listeners could understand that ideal to convey a message of consolation, triumph, and hope. Hopefully, also, future studies will take off from this beginning, deepen whatever insights these pages hold, and correct their errors. One claim, at least, I would like to believe that time will not alter, and that is the claim that the Jewish martyrological poets of medieval northern Europe have left us a powerful body of literature. Some of these poets were good poets, some were better, and some were worse. But together, they sought to make sense of the deeds of their enemies and their own responses, to mark the limits of human weakness and strength, and to maintain faith with the inscrutable, almighty God whose collision with their lives had taken such a tragic toll. Yet, in the world where a “beautiful death” was not only thinkable but often embraced, these poets and their poetry struggled to convey to their immediate listeners and beyond that the ultimate gesture of human faith in a violent and mystifying world was one of beauty and love. How they said this is, in brief, the subject of this book.

Notes

1. For a general history of Jewish settlement in northern Europe and in northern France particularly, see Chazan, 1973a; Jordan, 1989; Stow, 1992. See also Jordan, 1998, pp. 27–45.

2. For a review and analysis of the sources, see Grossman, 1989, introduction and first chapter; and 1975, pp.154–85; Marcus, 1981. For a legendary account of the same geographical movement, see Gerson D. Cohen, 1960–61, pp. 55–131; Marcus, 1990, pp. 365–88; and Stow, 1992. Abraham Grossman has claimed the same pattern for the transfer of martyrological motifs in “The Roots of Martyrdom in Early Ashkenaz,” 1993, pp. 99–130. As shown by Amy Remensnyder, 1995, Charlemagne was a popular figure in monastic foundation myths, too; her study focuses on monasteries of southwestern France.

3. Chazan, 1973a and 1987; Soloveitchik, 1998.

4. Urbach, 1955; Kanarfogel, 1993.

5. See Simha Goldin, 1996a.
6. For several detailed case studies, see Langmuir, 1990a. See also Langmuir's more metahistorical treatment in *History, Religion and Anti-Semitism*, 1990b. For a study of the libel in the early modern period, see Po-chia Hsia.
7. Strayer, 1971a, pp. 239–50.
8. It is not clear that they were aware of Josephus' account of the mass suicide at Masada, for instance. For the Ten Martyrs, see B. Avodah Zara 18a, or the poetic version preserved in the "Eleh ezkerah," the text of which may be found in the *Sefer haDema'ot*, ed. Bernfeld, 1:103. Regarding the circulation of these and other martyrological traditions, see Grossman, 1993; Gerson Cohen, 1953, Hebrew section, pp.109–112; Bowman.
9. See, for the first instance, some of the rhetorical examples (such as the lament of the Cross) used by Geoffrey of Vinsauf in his poetic treatise, the *Poetria Nova*. See Woods and Copeland; I thank Professor Woods also for making available her work-in-progress on Geoffrey of Vinsauf and the *Poetria Nova*.
10. Grossman, 1997; Abulafia, 1995; Dahan, 1990a. For specific studies of the relationship between Scholastic and *peshat* exegesis, see Signer, 1982, 1988, 1993.
11. See, for instance, Dan, 1971; Alexander. For examples from the folk literature, see Gaster, or more recently, Yassif, 1999. For a recent cross-cultural study, see Ivan Marcus, 1996.
12. Gerson Cohen, 1993.
13. Woods (forthcoming): "the format of prose instruction combined with verse examples" was a characteristic of some of the rhetorical texts of the time and made them highly "suitable for the classroom."
14. For one scholar's discussion of this question, see Yerushalmi, 1982.
15. Brann; Scheindlin, 1980, 1994.
16. Habermann, 1945b, pp. 289–98.
17. See Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary to Eccles. 5:1; his position is expanded in his philological works, the *Safah berurah* and *Sefat-yeter*. For full citations and an analysis of their significance, see Yahalom.
18. Mark Cohen comments: "In short, the very Jewish historians who created what Salo Baron disparagingly calls 'the lachrymose conception of Jewish history' in Christian Europe also invented its counterpoint: the 'myth of the interfaith utopia' in Islam" (3).
19. The phrase is Rénan's, p. 478, and see Darmesteter, 1874, p. 6.
20. As recently as 1997, in fact, in its advertisement for a theme year on "Hebrew poetry and culture," the Center for Advanced Jewish Study at the University of Pennsylvania mentioned only medieval Spain and Renaissance Italy, eliding altogether medieval Christian Europe.
21. For a detailed study of Capetian policies and their effects, see Jordan, 1989.
22. Note Wolfson's comment with respect to kabbalistic literature, where the restriction of authors and audience to men trained to read rabbinic texts led to very "little change with regard to the major themes that engaged their imagination." Wolfson, 2000. According to Wolfson, had "conditions been more diverse, the range of attitudes reflected in the sources would have been wider. But the historical reality is that in the formative period of kabbalistic symbolism such

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variety in social context is absent. I sympathize with the contemporary tendency to seek multiple voices in the reading of texts, and I applaud the attempt to avoid a totalizing and reductive hermeneutic. However, in the case of traditional kabbalistic sources, I submit that the general invariability and redundancy are due to male exclusivity and social homogeneity fostered by the androcentrism of medieval rabbinic culture” (134).

23. Geertz, p. 29.

24. Again, I defer to an anthropological concept elaborated by Ortner, who wrote of the importance of key symbols in a given culture, some of which she calls “summarizing symbols,” that speak to a “broader context of attitude” so that “many other cultural ideas and attitudes presuppose, and make sense only in the context of, those meanings formulated by the symbol.” Ortner, esp. p. 1343a.

25. Tom Head has made the point in a particularly chastening fashion in writing of the medieval ordeal: “But the work of recent scholars of the ordeal show to bad effect the influence of Clifford Geertz’s oft-cited study of the Balinese cock-fight. In making that ritual a symbolic theatre in which Balinese society itself takes center stage, Geertz made his audience lose sight of the fact that at the ritual’s heart stood a pair of crazed fowls with razor blades attached to their legs. . . . And so, *mutatis mutandis*, historians of the ordeal. For they have overlooked the most obvious aspect of the ordeal by fire. In the midst of its ritual theatre, bodies burned.” Head, 2000a, p. 233.

26. See, for instance, Cazelles; Coon; Newman; Mooney; Szarmach; and of course the groundbreaking studies of Bynum, beginning with *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

27. The filmmaker Spike Lee did not invent Malcolm X, nor did Oliver Stone invent JFK. The novelist Don DeLillo did not fabricate Lee Harvey Oswald, etc.

28. With regard to Christian hagiography, Lifshitz has expressed much the same view. See her “Beyond Positivism and Genre: The ‘Hagiographical’ Text As a Historical Narrative.”

29. See Fleischer, 1994, pp. 267–316, who attacked the controversial article of Israel Yuval.

30. See, for instance, Mark Cohen, pp. 3–4.

31. Most recently by Rubin, in her *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*.