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**USURY**

From the beginning of their tenure in Europe (and elsewhere), many Jews were merchants. This provided a base as they began expanding into money lending activities, including usury. Usury is defined most simply as money lending for profit. In medieval times it was universally condemned as a heinous and immoral act by the Christian church. The act of usury was deemed a mortal sin, and its practitioner's path of greed was understood to end in eternal damnation in Hell. The idea of profiteering from someone else's need -- possibly desperate -- for money was believed by medieval Christianity to be the antithesis of compassion, generosity, and charity. Christ was upheld as an example of poverty, non-materialism, and abstinence. Common wisdom asserted that those who had surplus money to lend in the first place were obsessed with greed and avarice and *needed* no more -- certainly by usury -- for their coffers. And making money for doing absolutely nothing (except having the money available) went against Christian medieval understandings of decency, justice, honest work, and morality. In essence, usury was perceived as a crass system of exponential exploitation by which the already wealthy could get increasingly wealthier for little more than the fact of their wealth in the first place. (In the nineteenth century, notes Abram Leon, Karl Marx argued that "usury centralized money wealth, where the means of production are disjointed. It does not alter the modes of production but attaches itself to it as a parasite, and makes it miserable. It sucks blood, kills its nerve and compels production to proceed under even more disheartening conditions." [LEON, p. 150])

As George Eaton Simpson and J. Milton Yinger observed:

"The church's condemnation of usury made sense in the relatively self-sufficient, largely barter economy in which a large proportion of the population lived, even down to the eighteenth century. Under those circumstances, a person borrows money only when he has suffered some unusual loss -- long illness of the breadwinner, loss of crops, a destructive fire. To charge interest in such a situation is to kick a man when he is down. To the great majority of people, this continued to be the perspective on interest-taking: it was robbery; money was unproductive and yet one had to pay for its use."  
[SIMPSON/YINGER, p. 295]

The vast gap between Christian and Jewish moral perspectives, per materialist self-aggrandizement, is evidenced everywhere in their respective traditions. In the Christian New Testament, for instance, Jesus enjoined values of humility and modesty to his followers, teaching that "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven." [LUKE 18-25] Jewish religious tradition stands in drastic opposition. The [Talmudic] Mishnah, for instance, proclaims, "Who is rich? He who enjoys his wealth." Likewise, there is no equivalent in Jewish mainstream tradition

to Christian vows of poverty and material abstinence, [SHAPIRO, p. 12] as epitomized in recent times by Mother Teresa. As the Talmud says: "Poverty in the home is more painful than fifty lashes." [KOTKIN, p. 46]

"Judaism is a this-world religion," says Joshua Halberstam, "and making money is considered a natural human endeavor. Unlike Christianity, Judaism never considered poverty a virtue; the idea that the meek shall inherit the earth is a New Testament doctrine, not a Jewish one." [HALBERSTAM, p. 25] "Judaism does not consider poverty noble," says Maurice Lamm, "... The Jew prays for *parnassah*, a respectable income." [LAMM, p. 108] As famed sociologist Max Weber wrote, "Pharisaic [i.e., rabbinic] Judaism was also far from rejecting wealth or from thinking that it be dangerous, or that its unqualified enjoyment endangers salvation. Wealth was, indeed, considered prerequisite to certain priestly functions." [POLL, S., 1969, p. vii]

The Jews were not forbidden in medieval Europe to become usurers. Because they refused to convert en masse to the dominant religious faith and, to Christian belief, be spiritually saved, Jews were considered outsiders. Whatever its continuously decried immoral atmosphere, usury was an economic opportunity and the Jewish community gravitated to it. In historical perspective, this niche they were afforded was a great economic privilege and a springboard for Jewish economic expansion to our own day. (In the Islamic world too, where usury was religiously prohibited to Muslims, Jews again gravitated towards that generally regarded repugnant activity). Of course there were, religious and legal injunctions or not, small numbers of Christian usurers too. But Jews had a distinct advantage in that they could be completely open in their profit-making activities. "The picture of the Jew," says Jacob Katz, "waiting at home for the Gentile to come to borrow money or pay a debt is a realistic one ... [but] many Jews also had also to call at the house of the Gentile to offer their services as traders or money-lenders." [KATZ, Ex, p. 38]

Christian usurers, who were despised at least as much by their co-religionists as Jews, usually had to be more discrete in their dealings. The gravity in which all usurers were violently hated by the general European population may be measured in the following passage by Jacques Le Goff:

"The persecution and slaughter of Italian usurers, in particular in France during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, were phenomena as frequent and widespread as pogroms against the Jews, with the one difference that the pogroms were prompted by religious motives as well as the hatred of wealthy moneylenders of a different faith." [LEGOFF]

"Italians and Hugenots," adds Alan Edelstein, "were expelled from France for economic reasons, and the same factors caused Germans in Novgorod to wall themselves for protection from Russian mobs." [EDELSTEIN, p. 23]

The exploitive nature of Jewish usury invariably alienated the Christian populace. The Cortes of Portugal, for instance, complained in 1361 that Jewish usury was becoming "an unbearable yoke upon the population." [LEON, p. 165] Guido Kisch, in a probable understatement, notes that "the continual complaints against Jewish moneylenders, coming from all classes of the medieval population, particularly in the 14th and 15th centuries, necessarily made the Jew an unpopular figure." [KISCH, p. 328] Usurious Jews who did no physical labor, who were segregated in their own communities, who did not serve in the local military, and who were agents of the hated aristocracy, were commonly accused of parasitism by local non-Jewish populaces. "Jewish money lending," says Salo Baron, "[was a] lucrative business ... For the most part, the accepted rate ranged between 33 and 43 per cent, although sometimes they went up to double and treble those percentages, or more ... When the European economy entered a period of deceleration in the late thirteenth century, further aggravated by recurrent famine and pestilence, such exorbitant charges, though economically doubly justified because of the increased risks, created widespread hostility." [BARON, EHOJ, p. 45] Money lending was not usually for a borrower's business expenses or expansion, but for subsistence survival. [MACDONALD, p. 263] We are talking about desperate people who often enough stood to perish from their web of increasing debt.

"It was not luxury needs," says Abram Leon, "but the direct distress which forced the peasant or the artisan to borrow from the Jewish usurer. They pawned their working tools which were often indispensable to assure their livelihood. It is easy to understand the hatred that the man of the people must have felt for the Jew in whom he saw the direct cause of his ruin ... [LEON, p. 171] In this role as petty usurers exploiting the people, [Jews] were often victims of bloody uprisings..." [LEON, p. 83] [uprisings that were] "first and foremost efforts to destroy the letters of credit which were in [Jewish] possession." [LEON, p. 171]

In 1431, for instance, armed peasants demanded that the city of Worms surrender its Jews to them, "in view of the fact that they had ruined [the peasants] and taken away their last shirt." [LEON, p. 172]

Usury was in fact considered immoral by Jews too. The great Jewish theologian, Maimonides, wrote "why is [usury] called *nesek* [biting]? Because he who takes it bites his fellow, causes pain to him, and eats his flesh." [MINKIN, p. 362] Usury was forbidden to Jews, as well as Christians, in the Old Testament. (The Islamic Quran also expressly states its prohibition of "interest.") But there was a qualifier. Jews conjured a double moral standard; usury upon others in their own community was prohibited, but usury upon non-Jews was acceptable. The Torah states that one cannot practice usury upon a *brother*, but can to a *stranger*. [DEUTERONOMY, 23:20] Who is a brother and who is a stranger? "Brother," in Jewish religious teachings means "Jew." "Stranger" is anyone else.

St. Ambrose (339-397), the bishop of Milan and writer whose works influenced later medieval Christian thinking, "considered lending to a stranger a legitimate hostile act against an enemy." [BARON, p. 53] St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a well-known Christian theologian of his time, sounded an idealized, universalized Christian ethic about the Deuteronomic double standard:

"The Jews were forbidden to take usury from their brethren, i.e., from other Jews. By this we are given to understand that to take usury from another man is simply evil, because we ought to treat every man as our neighbor and brother..."  
[NELSON, p. 14]

"All Jewish converts [to Christianity] of early sixteenth century Germany," says R. Po-Chia Hsia, "attacked the practice of Jewish money lending." One convert, Johannes Pffeferkorn, argued that profits from usury was the main reason that Jews remained Jews, that they were reluctant to become Christians and do "honest work." Another, Anton Margaritha, argued that such "honest work by Jews would humble them." [HSIA, p. 172] (Conversely, in England, the Jewish "monopoly of usury brought them such wealth that some Christians undoubtedly went over to Judaism in order to participate in the Jewish monopoly in lending.") [LEON, p. 140, quoting BRENTANO]

A double standard ethic was endemic to traditional Jewish teachings. The Old Testament laws were for the benefit of Jews, and it always aggravated relations with their non-Jewish neighbors. The medieval Christian world held open doors to Jewish converts to the purported universality of their own faith, but most Jews opted for their own perception of themselves as an elite group -- God's special Chosen People -- despite the inevitable hazards that such a self-perception engendered from the surrounding non-Jewish communities. The old adage to avoid trouble, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," was studiously dismissed by Jews to the extreme. They were even permitted talmudic (religiously-founded) self-governance by Christian authorities and were only called to the greater laws of the state for extraordinary transgressions. This situation provided Jews the uninhibited capacity to act within favorable, double-standard, self-aggrandizing laws created for themselves against the wider society. As Jacob Katz notes:

"The belief that Jewish law was of divine origin, whereas Gentile law was purely a human invention, linked any evaluation with with the most fundamental theological tenet of Judaism. The moral conduct of the Jew towards Gentiles, if it was not to be determined solely by expediency and prudence, could have been influenced only by principles derived exclusively from Jewish sources." [KATZ, Ex, p. 59]

Israeli professor Ehud Sprinzak notes traditional Jewish perspective on the surrounding Gentile "law of the land" in Eastern Europe:

"Everyone knew everybody in the [Jewish community], and there was no need for official code or written law. The only formal law was the Torah and its *halakhic* interpretation as understood by the local rabbi ... It was a basis communal conduct ... ('You help me, and I'll you') ... The attitude towards the formal law of the land was suspicion

... One has to survive it, not respect it. The art of Jewish survival within the ghetto included an elaborate system of using, avoiding, and sidestepping the [Gentile] law." [SPRINZAK, Elite, p. 178]

Or, as James Yaffe puts it:

"The feeling of separation ... leads to a special Orthodox morality. Ultimately because the moral value of every act is determined by *halakhah*, by Jewish law, they develop a rather cavalier attitude toward 'gentile' law. For example, a tiny minority of Hasidim [in America today] engage in jewelry smuggling. In the *shtetl* [Jewish Eastern European village] this was a traditional trade. Nobody looked upon it as a crime, because nobody recognized the existence of national borders; the only borders that mattered were those that divided the Jewish from the gentile world." [YAFFE, J., 1968, p. 120]

The combination of insular self-governance, their languages of Hebrew and/or Yiddish, and self-imposed isolation, also inferred (and was in fact understood by Jews to be) a Jewish "sub-nationality" within the broader Christian state. This too was much resented by the indigenous European populace. It was a politically volatile situation. Each faith, the majority Christian and minority Judaic, was entrenched in its respective belief system, each implicitly hostile to the other, with the only significant intercourse between them being the world of commerce, a field in which Jews were rapidly building, despite their small numbers -- through trade and the hated usury -- a profound advantage.

In this context of mutual hostility, Jacob Katz paraphrases the sociologist Max Weber with regards to the Jewish community's "extreme" use of its moral double standard in its treatment of non-Jews, commercially or otherwise:

"[While it is a] universal phenomena... [that] members of any cohesive social unit observe ... different moral standards among themselves from those observed by it in relation to strangers, [the sociologist Max Weber] was right in depicting the medieval Jewish community as an extreme case in point..." [KATZ p. 56]

Bearing in mind that the only interaction Jews really had with Christians in this era was in the realm of commerce, this double standard -- ethically treating Jews one way, and Gentiles the other -- is again highlighted by Katz:

"No moral teaching could change the realities of religious rivalry, social segregation, and the plurality of legal systems. All these must have encouraged a double standard of behavior. Those who

were reluctant to be guided by the higher morality had the letter of the law on their side." [KATZ, p. 61]

For the Jewish part, Katz's referral to "the letter of the law" is their sacred Talmud, and other Jewish teachings which "are far from forming the elements of a universalistic ethic. They took social duality for granted," [KATZ, Ex, p. 63] which is a delicate way of saying that Jewish religious teachings were commonly interpreted to sanction the exploitation of non-Jews.

It is hard to miss the intention of the Talmud, or misinterpret its noble meaning, or "pilpul" it into something other than what it is, when it says:

"Rabbi Shemeul says advantage may be taken of the mistakes of a Gentile. He once bought a gold plate as a copper one of a Gentile for four zouzim, and then cheated him out of one zouzim in the bargain. Rav Cahana purchased a hundred and twenty vessels of wine from a Gentile for a hundred zouzim, and swindled him in the payment out of one of the hundred, and that while the Gentile assured him that he confidently trusted his honesty. Rava once went shares with a Gentile and bought a tree, which was cut up into logs. This done, he bade, his servants to go pick out the largest logs, but to be sure to take no more than the proper number, because the Gentile knew how many there were. As Rav Ashi was walking abroad one day he saw some grapes growing in a roadside vineyard, and sent his servant to see whom they belonged to. 'If they belong to a Gentile,' he said, 'bring some here to me, but if they belong to an Israelite, do not meddle with them.' The owner, who happened to be in the vineyard, overheard the Rabbi's order and called out, 'What? Is it lawful to rob a Gentile?' 'Oh, no,' said the Rabbi evasively, 'a Gentile might sell, but an Israelite would not.'" [HARRIS, p. 182, BAVA KAMA, Fol. 113, col. 2]

This is to be found in Jewish religious texts. Likewise, this:

"When an Israelite and a Gentile have a lawsuit before them, if they canst, acquit the former according to the laws of Israel, and tell the latter such is our laws; if they cannot get him off in accordance with Gentile law, do so, and say to the plaintiff such is your law; but if he cannot be acquitted according to either law, then bring forward adroit pretext and secure his acquittal. These are the words of Rabbi Ishmael. Rabbi Akiva says, 'No false pretext should be brought forward, because if found out, the name of God would be blasphemed, but if there be no fear of that, then it may be adduced.'" [HARRIS, p. 31, BAVA KAMA, Fol. 113 col. 1]

"The economic behavior of the Jew," wrote the great sociologist Max Weber, "simply moved in the direction of the least resistance which was permitted them by [their] legalistic ethical norms. This means in practice that the acquisitive drive, which is found in varying degrees in all groups and nations, was here directed primarily to trade with strangers [i.e., non-Jews], who were usually regarded as enemies." [WEBER, p. 254]

In medieval Poland, "the limitations upon non-Jews [by Jewish law and culture] were ... stringent," notes Bernard Weinryb,

"Being outsiders in the Jewish community they were subject to all the prescriptions applying to foreigners. Thus Jewish middlemen and agents were forbidden to put one non-Jewish businessman in contact with another or to bring a non-Jewish consumer into a non-Jewish store. Many warnings were issued to such agents against showing non-Jews 'how to do business' or divulging Jewish business secrets to him ... Jews were forbidden to rent a room to a non-Jew ... Another area controlled by the Jewish community was rents and leaseholds. In time ... monopolistic tendencies increased among the Jews ... The fact remained that the monopolistic-exclusion principles were also an integral part of the Jewish way of life and could thus not be regarded as a constant anti-Semitic factor directly solely against themselves." [WEINRYB, p. 159]

In an overview of Polish history, another Jewish scholar, Eva Hoffman, notes

"that the Jews had their views of the people among whom they lived we cannot doubt, but their ordinary opinions, ideas, and preconceptions are largely inaccessible to us, since almost no secular Jewish literature is extant for the early period. We do know, however, that Jews had their exclusionism and monopolistic practices, prohibiting rights of residence to outsiders in their quarters, and strictly guarded certain business practices and 'secrets' from non-Jews ... We can take it for granted, moreover, that fierce religious disapproval traveled both ways [between Jews and Poles] ... At the same time, unlike other minority groups, Jews had no wish to assimilate, to take on the coloring of the surrounding culture, to become like the other." [HOFFMAN, E., 1997, p. 45]

Strict adherence to Jewish laws and values by even the most corrupt of Jewry was typical of the Jewish underclass of Europe's Middle Ages who found in their religious beliefs sanction for their predations on Gentiles. "Despite all their depravity," says Mordechai Breuer, "members of the Jewish robber bands

lived as Jews and generally adhered to traditional Jewish lifestyles and customs. As a rule, they did not undertake any expedition on the Sabbath [Saturday] and kept the dietary laws." [BREUER, in MAYER, p. 249]

"Jewish bandits stole almost exclusively from Christians," notes Otto Ulbrichtl, "No breaking into houses of Court Jews or representatives of the Jewish community or synagogues (in contrast to the many burglarized churches) were reported." [ULBRICHT, p. 62]

Florike Egmond's historical work about organized crime in the Netherlands (1650-1800) notes the following:

"[There was] picking pockets, the theft of textiles and gold or silver, and church robbery with its concomitant violence against priests and clergy. None of these was the exclusive domain of Jews, who were involved in various other subcategories of theft and burglary as well, but in these particular offences Jews were especially prominent ... [EGMOND, p. 108] ... Some Jewish groups specialized in church robbery ... From 1680 to 1795 the robbery of churches and priests and clergy was the nearly exclusive domain of Jews ... [EGMOND, p. 109] ... Jews robbed not only Roman Catholic priests but Protestant ones too. It looks rather as if most Christian thieves stayed away from all churches, while Jewish thieves selected churches for more reasons than just convenience." [EGMOND, p. 110]

In pre-Holocaust Poland and Russia, notes Yiddish expert Abraham Brumberg, Jewish thieves, pimps, and prostitutes developed a rich folklore of hundreds of songs, mostly in this tenor:

"I go into the street  
I open a door  
I spot a fur coat  
I invite it to go with me." [LESTER, p. 36]

Such a worldview that callously preys upon surrounding Gentile society was apparently not considered to be incongruous with the fundamental tenets of Judaism. As Brumberg notes, "Many who subscribed to these [thieving] values considered themselves God-fearing and had their own synagogues." [LESTER, p. 36] [This we shall run across again]

There is a tradition of Yiddish criminal songs in Eastern Europe:

"The two large cities of Warsaw and Odessa 'boasted' of a strong Jewish underworld which lived by its own laws, and the songs in this category



are varied and vivid, revealing the sentiments of the criminal world in the Pale (area of Czarist Russia where Jews were permitted to live). In many ways, these songs are similar to those of the non-Jewish world on themes that dealt with the life and pursuits of housebreakers, pickpocketes, hijackers, counterfeiters, extortionists, gangsters, pimps and even murderers. These are genuine folk songs, products of anonymous singers, actual persons who daily evaded the police, faced the hostility of the respectable community, quarreled and brawled among themselves, experienced the dangers and pleasures of their 'chosen profession.'" [RUBIN, R., 1979]

In 1939 Chaim Kaplan, a German-born Jew, noted the Jewish émigrés at the Russian-Polish border where 2,000 Jews were given a monetary advance by the Soviet government for a work project in the Soviet hinterlands: "To our shame, only 800 returned to accept the work and take the journey -- the rest disappeared without a trace. They simply expressed their gratitude to the Soviet government, which had extended its protection and opened its borders to them, with trickery. There were also incidents of stealing from private people. Polish-born Jews are rather high-handed in matters of 'yours' and 'mine,' and if they don't actually steal, they 'take' ... There can be no atonement for such shameful behavior. It reflects on the character of an entire people." [KAPLAN, C., p. 90]

Jews were popularly perceived in medieval (and even up to modern Europe) as either ostentatiously wealthy parvenus or predatory small time thieves, with considerable moral overlap between them. Both groups were significant players in local economies with the Jewish upper-class and underclass often linked in economic exploitation of the non-Jewish communities around them. "From Court Jews to peddler," says Jonathan Israel, "those divergent groupings penetrated and depended on each other economically, as well as in religion and commercial life. It would be idle to deny that there was exploitation as well as collaboration and interdependence, but such exploitation existed on all levels and operated in all ways." [ULBRICHT, p. 59]

One of the privileges that Jews often sought and acquired from European aristocracies in the Middle Ages was the right to demand full payment from aggrieved owners when stolen objects found their way into Jewish hands for sale. This caused deep resentment amongst the Gentile population; it was often charged that this policy paved the way for lucrative Jewish "fencing" operations where stolen goods could regularly find their ways to Jewish shops and hiding spots in the their community. [BARON EHOJ, p. 42] These Jewish agents of receivership were called in Hebrew *ba'al ha-davar*, literally meaning 'wire pullers,' figuratively meaning "Masters of the Affair." [BREUER, p. 249]

Florike Egmond notes the same kinds of Jewish fencing operations in the eighteenth century in the Netherlands:

"Two equally salient characteristics of Jewish organized crime [were] its near monopoly on the buying and selling of stolen goods

and the central importance of towns to all its activities ... [EGMOND, p. 115] ... The near monopoly of Jews in the fencing business indirectly contributed to the prominence of other Jews in organized crime ... [EGMOND, p. 116] ... The period between about 1740 and 1765 can be regarded as the phase of expansion of Jewish crime. After that Jewish involvement in organized crime continued at a consistently high level." [EGMOND, p. 119]

Although based in urban areas, Jewish bands were highly mobile and also preyed on those in the countryside. "Jews involved in organized crime in the Netherlands," adds Egmond, "were often active in retail trade ... Extensive travelling also meant numerous contacts with other Jewish peddler." [EGMOND, p. 123] Eventually, common self-protective interests brought some Jewish, Gypsy and Christian criminals together. Egmond notes, however, that "most Christians who joined Jewish bands, whether they acted as occasional assistants or as experienced members" were always considered "outsiders." [EGMOND, p. 145] In the case of one crime ring, the "Great Dutch Band," a band of mixed ethnicity, it was formed by Moyse Jacob "who played a central role in bringing together the various criminal circuits of the Dutch Republic within a more permanent organizational structure." [EGMOND, p. 148] In the Great Dutch Band's first (Brabant) "branch," two-thirds of its sixty members were Jews; in its second branch (the Meerssen Band), two-thirds of its sixty members were also Jewish; and 16 of 25 people were Jewish in the Band's third expression. In the fourth, Jews were a quarter of the group. "The first [branch]," notes Egmond, "set the pattern with respect to criminal specialization, leadership, and forms of organization. All the principal commanders had been instructed (and probably selected) by Moyse Jacob himself." They were also all Jewish. [EGMOND, p. 149]

In a volume about Polish peasant society, William Thomas and Florian Znaiecki note that

"The Jewish shopkeeper in a [Polish] peasant village is usually also a liquor dealer without license, a banker lending money at usury, often also a receiver of stolen goods and (near the border) a contrabandist. The peasant needs, and fears, him, but at the same time despises him always and hates him often. The activities of those country shop keepers is the source of whatever anti-Semitism there is in the peasant masses. We have seen in the documents the methods by which the shopkeeper teaches the peasant boy smoking, drinking, and finally stealing; the connection established in youth lasts sometimes into maturity, almost every gang of peasant thieves or robbers centers around some Jewish receiver's place, where the spoils are brought and new campaigns planned. Gangs composed exclusively of Jews are frequent in towns, rare in the country; usually Jews manage only the commercial side of the questions, leaving robbing or transporting of contraband to peasants." [THOMAS/ZNAIECKI, p. 1200-1201]

Jewish itinerants (perhaps 10% of the Jewish population in Germany in the Middle Ages), as well as Jewish thieves, and robbers were common in European life. Evidence of Christian criminals' linkage to the Jewish economic underworld is reflected in the fact that "some 20%" of the vernacular for illicit activity in the jargon of non-Jewish criminals contained words and terms derived from Yiddish and Hebrew. [BREUER, p. 248]

Oklahoma professor Stan Nadel notes the reason for the spreading of Yiddish criminal terms into the English language across the world:

"It seems that [the Yiddish word] *gonef* (sometimes *gonnoff*, hence the false etymology) entered American and English slang via what is known as thieves' cant. One of the traditional occupations for Jews in Europe and America was as pawnbrokers. That is an occupation which tends to bridge the border between the criminal and business worlds. At the margin, the line between pawnbroker and fence (handler of stolen goods) is often obscured and some Jews played an important part in the criminalized underground of large cities ... I had assumed [the term *gonef*] moved into American English from German Jewish immigrants in New York (like [famous Jewish criminal] Mrs. Mandelbaum) until I learned it was also present in 18th century London thieves' cant. Then I was told by a specialist on the 18th century London underworld that Jewish fences played a key role in linking the London underworld with markets in Amsterdam (he says they claimed they could fence anything, including the crown jewels), and that this is the source of Yiddish loan words in English thieves cant." [NADEL, S., 6-18-98]

But, as we will increasingly find, it was not only the Jewish vagabonds, unscrupulous shopkeepers, or exploitive upper strata Court Jews who played the role of swindler with the Gentiles. No less an authority than Heinrich Graetz, one of the greatest Jewish historians whose History of the Jews was a pioneer work, had this to say, *generally*, about the Jews in Poland. It was a mainstream ethic

"to twist a phrase out of its meaning, to use all the tricks of the clever advocate, to play upon words, and to condemn what they did not know ... Such were the characteristics of the Polish Jew. ... Honesty and right thinking he lost as completely as simplicity and truthfulness. He made himself master of all the gymnastics of the Schools (of religious interpretations) and applied them to obtain advantage over any one less cunning than himself. He took a delight in cheating and overreaching which gave him a sort of joy of victory. But his own people he could not treat in this way: they were as knowing as he. It was the non-Jew, to his loss, that felt the consequences of the Talmudically trained mind of Polish Jew." [GRAETZ, v.10, p. 62,

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Israeli professor Jay Goren recalls the Jacob-Esau tradition, where Jacob, the Jewish cheater/deceiver, is heroized in Jewish tradition, noting:

"As we may recall, Jacob the tent dweller, who used his head, outsmarted Esau, the skilled hunter, who uses his hands, and cheated Esau out of his inheritance, Isaac's blessing. The blessing was the birthright of Esau by virtue of his being the firstborn child. In Jewish tradition, Jacob came to symbolize the Jews and Esau the Gentiles. Thus, an image of contrasting roles were formed whereby the Jews were supposed to use their heads and the Gentiles their muscles."  
[GOREN, p. 135]

The Israeli author Israel Shahak in 1994 argued that Orthodox Judaism is, in its very construct, motivated by "a combination of hypocrisy and the profit motive." Even in Israel today, secular Jews look with disdain upon the Orthodox religious community for its "duplicity and venality." "It is actually true," Shahak writes, "that the Jewish religious establishment does have a strong tendency to chicanery and graft due to the corrupting influence of the Orthodox Jewish religion." [SHAHAK, p. 48] [See Jewish drug money laundering, later chapter]

The great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, echos Graetz and Shahak in his own observations of the Jewish community:

"[The Jews], living among us, or at least the greatest number of them, have through their usurious spirit ... received the not unfounded reputation as deceivers ... They do not seek civil honor, but rather wish to compensate their loss by profitably outwitting the very people among whom they find protection ... We may suppose that their dispersion throughout the world, with their unity in religion and language, must not be attributed to a curse that had been afflicted upon this people. On the contrary, the dispersion must be considered a blessing, especially since the wealth of the Jews, if we think of them as individuals, apparently exceeds per capita that of any other nation at the present time. [KANT, p. 101-102]

A well-known French Jewish socialist (and later Zionist), Bernard Lazare, addressed this issue of Jewish morality in 1894:

"The moral charge of the anti-Semite [is that] the Jew is more dishonest than the Christian; he is entirely unscrupulous, a stranger to loyalty and candor. Is this charge well founded? It was true and is true in all those

countries where the Jew is kept outside of society; where he receives only the traditional Talmudic education.... The Talmud and anti-Judaic legislation [in Gentile societies] united to corrupt the Jew to his very depths. Impelled by his teachers on the one hand, by hostile forces on the other, by many social causes besides, to the exclusive occupation of commerce and usury, the Jew became degraded. The pursuit of wealth ceaselessly prosecuted, debauched him, weakened the voice of conscience within him, taught him habits of fraud." [LAZARE, p. 164]

This ethic was of course brought by Jews, particularly from Eastern Europe, to America. As Jewish commentator James Yaffe notes: "The Lower East Side [the turn-of-the-century Jewish section of Manhattan] pushcart peddler who prided himself on his honesty wouldn't hesitate to sell damaged goods to the gentile housewife." [YAFFE, J., 1968, p. 68] Max Weber notes this quality in Jewish identity through history, referring to it as "the dualistic nature of [Judaism's] in-group and out-group moralities." [POLL, S., 1969, p. v]

As Mary Antin, a Jewish immigrant to the United States from Russia, once observed in her autobiography, *The Promised Land*:

"[Jewish merchants and money lenders] preyed upon [Christians], and our shopkeepers gave false measure. People who want to defend the Jews ought never to deny this. Yes, I say, we cheated the Gentiles whenever we dared, because it was the only thing to do ... Is not that the code of war? Encamped in the midst of the enemy, we could practice no other. A Jew could hardly exist in business unless he developed a dual conscience, which allowed him to do to the Gentile what he would call a sin against a fellow Jew." [TRAXEL, D., 1998, p. 29]

Many modern Jewish apologists refute such exposure and criticism of traditional Jewish double standard of morality. As we have seen, when caught in the act of deceit there are religious texts that recommend explaining it quickly somehow away. Jules Carlebach, for example, argues that a "dual morality" -- if, in his view, it ever existed -- was no big deal; he likens the Jewish medieval communities in Europe to "independent political states," saying:

"If an independent political state adopted legislation which is intended to further the interests of its citizens, but which has no parallel provisions in neighboring states, then it is both logical and essential to create a dual system." [CARLEBACH, p. 224]

Jews had always closed ranks as a completely "foreign" body in mainstream Christian society. While some Jewish religious teachings certainly supported the notion that they should live in obedience with the laws of the host country they lived in, this was largely expedient and prudent for their own

survival. Less supportive Jewish texts included prayers that anticipated the downfall of surrounding non-Jewish society. During Arab-Christian hostilities, for instance, Jews appealed to God to drain them both in war. They had a prayer, notes Salo Baron, "composed in the geonic period which was unheard of in any other period of Jewish history in the dispersion: 'Be it Thy will, O Lord, that the Kings should wage war on one another.'" [BARON, ASOC&REL, p. 186]

Jewish communities in Europe, as insular self-entities always searching for their own best interests, had been known to betray non-Jewish lands in which they lived. Both Hebrew and Yiddish were Jewish languages that were impenetrable to most non-Jews. (For centuries rabbinical dictate even forbade the teaching of Hebrew to Gentiles). These "secret" languages tended to heighten non-Jewish suspicions of them. The Muslim invasion of Christian Spain was aided by the Spanish Jewish community who expected better treatment under Islamic rule. The French city of Bordeaux was believed by some to have been betrayed by Jews in 848 to invading Normans; the same charge was made against Jews for the fall of the French town of (Visigothic) Arles to Catholics. Poles charged Jews with abetting invading Swedes in the 17th century. [HAGEN, p. 23] In the 12th century, Byzantine Jews aided invading Turks (Constantinople was breached with help from -- and through -- the Jewish quarter); in the 17th century Spanish and Portuguese Jews intrigued with the Dutch. [MACDONALD, p. 64-65] On the other hand, in the early 1800s, when Napoleon invaded the Pale of Russia, "the pattern of German-Jewish behavior during the Napoleonic invasion was largely repeated in Russia." [SACHAR, p. 79] The Jews, in other words, did nothing, laid low, and waited to see who was victorious. "With the exception of the Jewish community of Lithuania," says Howard Sachar, "the citizens of the Pale were not obliged to commit themselves until the war was won." [SACHAR, p. 79]

The Italian ambassador to Poland, Eugenio Reale, in 1946 wrote an analysis of the "Jewish question" in Poland:

"In effect, Polish Jews together with German Jews held a monopoly over all exports and imports of goods between Germany and Russia. Certain branches of manufacture in Poland were also under their control, particularly the textile industry in Lodz. It is of little wonder, then, that the Jews often manifested their true, undeniably existing feelings of solidarity with the Prussians. In Pomerania, during the 1848 insurrections, groups of Jews greeted the insurgents with shouts such as: 'We do not want Poland, we are Prussians.' Almost a half century later, during the Warsaw manifestations in favor of Polish autonomy in the Russian sphere, the Jews took a similar position against the demonstrators, shouting, 'Why should Poland exist? Down with Poland! Down with the white eagle [the symbol of Poland].'" [PIOTROWSKI, p. 46]

In Morocco under French rule, notes Nahum Goldmann, "the Jews were on such poor terms with the Arabs that they were nearly all pro-French -- which brought them the hatred of those who aspired to

independence." In Algeria, also bucking under French colonialism, Jews "even had automatic French citizenship, unlike the non-Jews." [GOLDMANN, N., 1978, p. 48] Even in 1996, notes the American Jewish Yearbook, "Between 800 and 900 Jews were known to be living in Bosnia-Herzegovina ... During the [civil] war, about 300 people who before the fighting had not declared themselves as Jewish joined the Jewish community, presenting written documentation such as marriage or birth certificates. Before the war, these people had declared themselves as 'Yugoslavs.' Some of them remained in Bosnia-Herzegovina while others went to Israel." [SINGER/SELDIN, 1997, p. 378]

The Jewish Diaspora community in Europe has been formally called to task by Christian authorities a number of times in history, including two momentous occasions to find out exactly what the Jews in their midst believed and where they morally, politically, socially, and religiously stood with regards to Gentiles. One of the most important accounts of such an occasion was in France in the year 1240. A Jewish apostate named Donin, Christianized to Nicholas de Rupella, well versed in Hebrew as a Talmudic scholar, claimed to Church officials that there were many elements in the Jewish teachings that were threatening to non-Jews. A public disputation was held between Donin and Rabbi Yehiel ben Joseph of Paris and as Jeremy Cohen notes about Hebrew records of the event: "Some modern writers have labeled the Hebrew protocol [of the disputation] a prime example of literary polemic, using well-known forensic motifs to reinforce popular Jewish belief rather than actually reporting what occurred." [COHEN, J., 1982, p. 66]

Jacob Katz notes the infamous line in the Talmud that came up for public examination, stating "The best among Gentiles should be slain." One can imagine that such a directive in Jewish religious texts, whatever its complex historical context as a part of intra-Jewish argument, exposed to Church leaders in Medieval society by a Jewish apostate, was not an easy one for the rabbis to explain away. Even Katz passes on its essential content, simply alluding to "whatever its meaning may be..." [KATZ, p. 108] M. K. Harris, in his book on Talmudic literature, adds an addenda to this opinion to "kill the best of the Gentiles." "Modern editions," notes Harris, "qualify this by adding 'in time of war.'" [HARRIS, p. 191]

The intention of the Church inquiry was, of course, to squeeze out of Jewish religious texts the most self-condemnatory sounding material. Hence, some of what Katz calls the Talmud's apparent "picture of extreme hostility on the part of the Jews towards their Christian neighbors" seemed nothing less than indicting:

'You have permitted [Jews] to shed the blood of Gentiles.' 'It is permitted to steal and plunder the Gentile's possessions and (it is allowed) to cheat him.' 'Concerning the lost property of a Gentile, you say that it is forbidden to return it to him.' The Gentile is suspected by the Jew of practicing fornication, adultery, and sodomy. The Jew is not allowed to make the Gentile any gift, nor is he even permitted to say, "How handsome this Gentile is;" it is permitted to you to curse and to despise idolatry'; and we are as despised in your eyes as locusts and flies.'" [KATZ, p. 107]

The way the rabbis weaseled out of the grim possibility of extremely serious repercussions for the Jewish community was to argue that such lines -- although they truly exist in Jewish sacred texts -- applied to Gentiles of antiquity, yes, but that Christians were now an exception. This position, says Katz, was "no more than an ad hoc device to be used in the course of controversy. There is no indication in the Talmud or in the later *halakhic* sources that such a view was ever held, or even proposed, by an individual halakhist. In fact, evidence to the contrary exists." [KATZ, p. 110] Rabbis even tried to convince Christian interrogators that insults and degradations in the Talmud directed towards Jesus of Nazareth referred to a different Jesus because it was a common name! [POPPER, p. 10] As Rabbi Yehiel ben Joseph said in defense of the Talmudic texts that defamed Christ, "Not every Louis born in France is the king of France. Has it not happened that two men were born in the same city, had the same name, and died in the same manner? There are many such cases." [COHEN, J., 1982, p. 70] "The Jesus of the Talmud," notes scholar Jeremy Cohen, "... is mentioned as condemned to wallow eternally in boiling excrement ... When forced to admit that one talmudic passage mentioning the crimes of Jesus and his execution did indeed apply to the Christian Jesus, Yehiel still emphasized that the Talmud was not responsible for maintaining this opinion among Jews." [COHEN, J., 1982, p. 71]

The Jewish representatives also took great pains to distance themselves from traditional prayers that asked, as the apostate noted, for the end of the "unrighteous kingdom." Did this mean the surrounding society in which the Jews currently lived? It did. This has always meant to Jews "the whole secular world and its entire political edifice" [KATZ, p. 112], but the Jewish defenders managed to convince their inquirers that the prayers alluded to the ancient powers of Biblical eras.

This formal inquiry evinced a renewed suspicion by the Church towards Jews, as well as an outside steering of the Judaic faith -- for their own safety -- towards liberalization. "The Paris disputation," says Katz, "marks a transition, from the comparative tolerance of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish faith to the harassing practice of scrutinizing and censuring Jewish customs and tenets. The same event assisted, or even compelled, the Jews to take a further step towards the idea of religious tolerance." [KATZ, p. 113]

In 1806 a second group of Jewish community leaders were forced to again face a formal inquiry into their belief system by the greater society in which they lived. This convening again occurred in France, but this time it was at Napoleon's insistence. The Jewish "Assembly of Notables," and later an even more influential assemblage of Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin, was presented with twelve written questions, upon whose answers their fate -- as a community -- was understood to rest. With the rise of the European nation states, conflicts between them, and with continued Jewish self-conception as a kind of sub national entity, Napoleon sought to confront the affluent and powerful parts of the Jewish community as to their ultimate political loyalties and allegiances.

Questions included:



- In the eyes of the Jews, are Frenchmen considered as brethren? Or are they considered strangers?
- In either case, what line of conduct does their law prescribe towards Frenchmen not of their religion?
- Do Jews born in France, and treated by the laws as French citizens, consider France as their country? Are they bound to defend it? Are they bound to obey the laws and to conform to the dispositions of the civil courts?
- Can a Jewess marry a Christian, and a Jew a Christian woman? Or does the law allow the Jews to intermarry only among themselves?
- Does Jewish law encourage Jews to practice usury among their own community?

The Jewish notables replied, after extended consultations, with an affirmation of Jewish loyalty to France and the brotherhood of all French citizens, complete with careful, cautioned, diplomatic explanation for all such replies. Napoleon's emissary, Count Mole, 'was struck by what appeared to him to be evasive references: now to Moses, now to the Talmud, now to practical Jewish usage. He was particularly suspicious of the answer on usury ... [but] Napoleon ... declared himself satisfied." [SACHAR, p. 48] The Jewish answers to Napoleon -- the compromises of both orthodox and secularly assimilated Jewish leaders -- are, in retrospect, considered also by historians to have been largely evasive. The gulf between those who represented traditional Jewish teachings and the growing numbers of secularized Jews was great, but both -- traditional and assimilative -- HAD to figure out ways to give Napoleon the answers he wanted. This gulf is reflected in Jacob Katz's view that

"Even learned Jews sincerely maintained that Judaism had always taught universalistic ethics only. When the 'scientific' anti-Semites of the 1880's discovered and published the extracts from ancient Jewish authorities on which earlier anti-Semitism had been based, the general Jewish public was not only outraged but genuinely astonished ... Jewish leaders and scholars reconciled the contemporary views with the ancient authorities by resorting to apologetics." [KATZ, p. 196]

Robert Goldenberg notes the long tradition of Jewish evasiveness when it comes to explaining the Talmud to non-Jews:

"[In the Middle Ages] Christians too studied the Talmud -- often with the help of apostate Jews -- and would then quote rabbinic authority in support of their own claims. Jews thus had to develop a double

attitude toward the nonlegal aspect of the Talmud: when it was useful to them they cited it to refute the Christians' claims, but when it weakened their position they felt free to repudiate it." [GOLDENBERG, R., 1984, p. 164-165]

In our day, Jewish apologists, propagandists, and populists continue to proliferate, reaching back into rabbinical law to recreate a romantic vision of the historical record of Jewish morality towards others. "The fact that the Jews in general," proclaims Nachum Gidal, in a polemic against Christianity, "were very ethical in their religion, family, and daily life was of little significance for the Christian community." [GIDAL, p. 12] "At all times and in all places," claims Meir Tamari, both a Talmudic scholar and the chief economist of the Bank of Israel, "Jews were encouraged, especially in the economic field, to go beyond the letter of the law and to that which was more merciful than required, even though the rabbinical authorities could not naturally enforce such kindness." [TAMARI, p.]

Or, as Jacob Neusner rhapsodizes:

"It is ethical for a Jew to guide the frail old lady across a busy street, it is also ethical for a Boy Scout to do so. And so being Jewish and being a Boy Scout functionally are pretty much the same thing." [NEUSNER, J., 1972, p. 75]