

ON THE IMAGE AND DESTINY OF GENTILES IN ASHKENAZIC POLEMICAL LITERATURE

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The hostile attitude toward Christian society found in medieval Ashkenazic literature is quite well known, and hardly needs to be demonstrated. Expressions of bitter animosity toward Christianity and its adherents are found throughout this literature, most especially in liturgical poetry, even before the catastrophe of the First Crusade in 1096. Israel Yuval has recently argued that these expressions of animosity are not merely reactions to medieval persecutions, but rather are rooted in an ancient, more comprehensive worldview, associated with apocalyptic ideas about the ultimate redemption.¹ However, he admits that the bloody incidents in 1096 certainly made this animosity harsher, and strengthened the Jews' desire for vengeance.² The unprecedented attacks and the martyrdom of thousands of Jews became implanted in the collective, long term Ashkenazic consciousness, and they reinforced the feelings of revulsion toward the murderous enemy and his false religion.

The Hebrew chronicles that deal with these events are filled with curses and expressions of reproach toward the Christian faith and its founder. Such expressions are found not only during the emotionally charged time of the catastrophe itself; in the years following 1096, too, Ashkenazic literature contains many terms of extreme derision and

- 1 Y. Y. Yuval, "Ha-Naqam ve-ha-Qelalah, ha-Dam ve-ha-Alilah," *Zion* 58 (1983): 37-44. See also A. Grossman, *Hakhmei Ashkenaz ha-Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1981), p. 99, n. 100.
- 2 Yuval, p. 41.

degradation for all that Christianity considers sacred. This phenomenon is found most especially in polemical literature.³

This literature focuses primarily on the question of the true religion. The personality, practices, and fate of the followers of false religions occupy only a secondary place in these writings. However, from the historian's point of view, these topics deserve special attention, for they shed light on a wide range of social contacts between the Jewish and Christian communities, and sometimes even directly affect the very heart of the polemical issue.

Our point of departure here will be Ashkenazic polemical literature, as expressed in its three major representatives: *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* (*Nizzahon Vetus*), and the disputation of R. Yehiel of Paris. However, our analysis will broaden from time to time, and we will deal with polemical literature from other areas and later periods, and other branches of medieval Jewish literature.

³ See D. Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 20–24, 302; A. Sapir Abulafia, "Invectives against Christianity in the Hebrew Chronicles of the First Crusade," in *Crusade and Settlement*, ed. by P. W. Edbury (Cardiff, 1985), pp. 66–72. A list of several of the Jewish derogatory terms for Christian concepts can be found in an appendix to M. Breuer's edition of *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* (Ramat Gan, 1978), p. 195. Amos Funkenstein incorrectly states that derogatory terms towards Christianity, which must have been common in the daily spoken language, are rare in polemical literature and are mainly attested in sources such as Tosafot. He seems to have come to this erroneous conclusion by comparing the extremely bitter expressions in Ashkenazic commentaries and halakhic works, on the one hand, to those found in polemical writings from Spain and southern France, on the other. It would have been far more fruitful for him to have compared the expressions found in Ashkenazic commentaries and halakhic works to those found in *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* and *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, and similar polemical works from northern Europe. See A. Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1993), p. 171.

The general lack of acquaintance with the standard Ashkenazic derogatory terms for Christian concepts has led scholars to misunderstand a line in a *qinah* (elegy) for the Ninth of Av about the 1096 massacres. The poet writes: *nit'orer goy az doresh shuhah*—a fierce nation arose, seeking a pit; or, according to a variant text, *koreh shuhah*—digging a pit. See *Seder ha-Qinot le-Tish'ah be-Av*, ed. by D. Goldschmidt (Jerusalem 1968), p. 84. Goldschmidt and others prefer the smoother reading, "digging a pit," an expression which is also found in other liturgical poems. Apparently, these scholars found the reading *doresh shuhah* ("seeking a pit") so difficult that even the principle of *lectio difficilior* was unable to rescue it. Nevertheless, it is clear that this is the correct reading, and in fact it is not difficult at all. The term *shuhah* (pit) was the standard Ashkenazic expression for the holy sepulcher. (See, for example, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, Hebrew section, pp. 61 and 63: the Arabs came to Jerusalem and "defiled the *shuhah*." The crusading armies were precisely "a fierce nation, seeking the *shuhah*."

THE IMAGE

There are many dimensions to the image of “the other,” but the first (often neglected in scholarly literature) is the physical dimension. An oppressed minority tends to adopt and internalize the values of the general culture to a certain extent. The Jews of the Middle Ages attempted to resist this tendency as far as religious and spiritual values were concerned—but a strange, gripping passage from *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, which appears in a different formulation in *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, shows that on the aesthetic/physical plane, this process did affect the Jews:

“Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people” (Malachi 2:9). A certain apostate said to R. Nathan: “You Jews are uglier than any people on the face of the earth, whereas we are very beautiful.” He responded: “What is the color of the blossom of the *shveske* which are called *prunelles*, which grow in the bushes?” The apostate replied: “White.” The rabbi asked: “And what color is the blossom of the apple tree?” The apostate replied: “Red.” The rabbi explained: “Thus, we come from clean, white seed, so our faces are black; but you are from red seed—from menstruants—and therefore your faces are yellow and ruddy.” But the real reason is that we are in exile, as it says in the Song of Songs, “Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun has gazed upon me: my mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard have I not kept” (Song of Songs 1:6). However, when I used to keep my own vineyard, I was quite beautiful indeed, as it is written, “And your renown went forth among the heathen for your beauty” (Ezekiel 16:14).⁴

R. Nathan’s response is representative of the classic polemical approach arguing that an apparent defect is actually an asset: physical inferiority is a direct result of ethical superiority. However, the author himself says that in fact, it is the exile that is truly responsible for the physical unattractiveness of the Jews.⁵ Either way, the Jewish partner in the debate is affirming the aesthetic judgment made by the gentiles. Since

⁴ *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, ed. by Y. Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 95.

⁵ This explanation appears also in a manuscript which Rosenthal quotes in his note ad loc.: “If a gentile should say to you, ‘We are beautiful, and you are not,’ you should reply: ‘Before our Temple was destroyed, we were more beautiful; . . . and when our Temple was destroyed, our beauty was taken away from us In the future, God is going to give it back to us.’ Cf. *Mishnah Nedārim* 9:10.

the criteria for attractiveness are largely subjective, the Jews' agreement with the gentile assessment has deep psychological significance.

Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson already noted this point in connection with the parallel passage in *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*.⁶ However, there is a major difference in that text:

The heretics [i.e., the Christians] ask: Why are most Gentiles fair-skinned and handsome while most Jews are dark and ugly? Answer them that this is similar to a fruit; when it begins to grow it is white but when it ripens it becomes black, as is the case with sloes and plums. On the other hand, any fruit which is red at the beginning becomes lighter as it ripens, as is the case with apples and apricots. This, then, is testimony that Jews are pure of menstrual blood so that there is no initial redness. Gentiles, however, are not careful about menstruant women and have sexual relations during menstruation; thus, there is redness at the outset, and so the fruit that comes out, i.e., the children, are light. One can respond further by noting that Gentiles are incontinent and have sexual relations during the day, at a time when they see the faces on attractive pictures; therefore, they give birth to children who look like those picture, as it is written, "And the sheep conceived when they came to drink before the rods" [Gen. 30:38–39].⁷

Sefer Nizzahon Yashan retains the same aesthetic judgment as *Yosef ha-Meqanne*; however, unlike *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, this author is unwilling to forego the consolation of reversing the gentile's argument even in his second explanation. Thus, the exile disappears entirely, and the second response provides a different version of the connection between physical ugliness and ethical beauty. *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* is a very aggressive work; in other passages, it argues that Jews are superior even on the physical level: "This is the interpretation of the statement, 'You have saved us from evil and faithful diseases,' in which we thank God for saving us from being afflicted with impure issue, leprosy and skin disease, as they are."⁸ This comment only reinforces the impact of the passage

⁶ H. H. Ben-Sasson, *Toledot Yisrael bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* (volume II of *Toledot Am Yisrael*) (Tel-Aviv, 1969), p. 168.

⁷ *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, p. 224.

⁸ *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, p. 211. As I note there (p. 340), this passage supports S. Baron's claim that the relative silence about lepers in medieval Jewish sources is evidence that the Jews suffered from this ailment to a lesser degree than their Christian neighbors. See S. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, volume IX (New York, London, and Philadelphia, 1965), p. 338, n. 14. See also Isaac Polgar's explicit statement in *Ezer ha-Dat*: "Anyone who examines our Torah will find . . . just and pure laws, such as

regarding beauty. The fact that this author, who is prepared to formulate surprisingly vigorous and aggressive arguments, sees Christian aesthetic superiority as a self-evident truth lends all the more significance to this phenomenon.

The same effort to turn a physical defect into a spiritual asset can be seen clearly in a unique passage which Marc Saperstein published from Isaac ben Yeda'ya's commentary to *Midrash Rabbah*. The author of this passage, who clearly suffered from a sexual problem, attributed this problem to all circumcised men. He writes as a general rule that circumcised men are unable to satisfy their wives' sexual needs; consequently, Jewish women do not receive much benefit from their husbands' presence and are willing to let them go study Torah and wisdom. This is not the case, however, with respect to the wives of the uncircumcised, whose husbands possess highly impressive sexual potency. Consequently, these men expend their time and energy in such activity and remain immersed in the vanity of the physical world.⁹

These attempts to make the bitter sweet sound pathetic to the modern reader, and they were probably not particularly convincing in the Middle Ages either. Now, from the isolated example of Isaac ben Yeda'ya, which deals with very private matters, it is hard to argue that many Jews considered themselves inferior to gentiles in their sexual ability. However, the sources about physical beauty appear quite convincing. In the consciousness of many Jews, ethical and spiritual superiority came at a very high physical and psychological price.

the prohibition of sleeping with a woman during her menstrual period, which . . . is the reason that we have been saved from the horrible ailment of leprosy, which is so common in individuals of the nations surrounding us" (*Ezer ha-Dat*, ed. by J. Levinger [Tel-Aviv, 1984], Part 1, Section 2, p. 36.) These two pieces of evidence—the *Nizzahon Yashan* from Ashkenaz, and Isaac Polgar from Spain—deserve our serious attention.

⁹ M. Saperstein, "The Earliest Commentary on the *Midrash Rabbah*," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature I*, ed. by I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1979), pp. 294–297; idem, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1980), pp. 97–102. Saperstein (p. 100) tentatively suggested that these words might be due to a personal problem of Isaac ben Yeda'ya: "To what extent do passages such as this reflect the personal experience of the author . . . ? To what extent do they seem to be an elaborate rationalization meant to solve personal problems which bothered him greatly?" I have no hesitation in changing Saperstein's tentative suggestion to a definite assertion. Any Jewish man who did not personally suffer from this problem would never have been able to create or affirm the delusional idea that every circumcised male suffers from it.

A famous passage in Isaac Polgar's *'Ezer ha-Dat* reflects the same problem and the same tendency. The topic of this passage is the cause of the suffering of exile—a major, central issue that I shall not address here. However, when Polgar writes that Jews suffer under the yoke of the gentiles because they have forgotten the art of war due to their dedication to the study of Torah and wisdom, the Temple service, and the cultivation of the quality of compassion, he is attempting to transform physical weakness into an ethical-spiritual asset. He does this through a naturalistic analysis whose method is essentially similar to the one which we find in *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, in *Nizzahon Yashan*, and in Isaac ben Yeda'ya's writing, with all the tortuous psychological complexity that this entails.¹⁰

¹⁰ “Because our perfect Torah has forbidden us from going in vain directions, and has prevented us from succumbing to the evil tendency alluded to in general terms by the commandment ‘You shall not covet,’ and more specifically by our other commandments, this means that we will necessarily be those who are oppressed, and not those who oppress, those who are humiliated and not those who humiliate others. But because physical desires, including this tendency, are not forbidden to the other nations, they are necessarily the oppressors and humiliators . . . When we were on our own land, we were elevated and sanctified above all the other nations that surrounded us. We kept the commandments of our glorious Torah, which forbids and prevents us from indulging all sorts of physical desires, and we broke the yoke of the evil inclination from upon our necks; thus, we refrained from acts of oppression. Moreover, we were commanded to spend our time delving into the Torah and studying other forms of wisdom, all day and all night, and this weakened us physically. Moreover, we had compassion and soft-heartedness impressed upon us at all times. We occupied ourselves with offering sacrifices in the Temple, and forgot how to engage in war . . . But the nations that surrounded us had exactly the opposite attributes from us; their heart was tough and cruel . . . Their way was to tear like wild beasts, bears or lions. They did not speak kindly to us, but gnashed their teeth at us, and gathered together and destroyed our city and our Temple, and took us captive, such that we were spread out all over the earth, with only a few of us surviving in each place. However, because we are certain that we have the truth, and that all physical desire for this world and its delights is vain, we are willing to bear this difficulty on our shoulders, and we trust our God, our rescuer, and he looks down and rescues us, so that we are able to live among our enemies and reside in the tents of those who seek our harm” (*Ezer ha-Dat* [see above, n. 8], Part 1, Section 5, pp. 55–56.) Needless to say, Polgar's words raise a theological challenge that is not present in the words of *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, or Isaac ben Yeda'ya. A naturalistic explanation for the exile of the Jewish people is considerably more problematic than a naturalistic explanation for unattractiveness or sexual dysfunction, and Polgar himself attempts to blunt the radical sting of his words in the subsequent paragraph in *'Ezer ha-Dat*.

On Spinoza's claim that Judaism has led to a “softening” of the Jews' nature, see S. Pines, “Histabberut ha-Tequmah me-Hadash shel Medinah Yehudit le-fi Yosef ibn Kaspi u-le-fi Spinoza,” *Iyyun* 14–15 (1963–4): 314–315; in the same article (p. 305), Pines provides a citation to a somewhat similar argument in a letter from Maimonides

Our examination of the physical depiction of the gentiles leads us to an investigation of their ethical depiction. The authors of polemical literature were primarily interested in identifying the true religion, and such identification is not necessarily dependent on the ethical behavior of the community that believes in that religion. Nevertheless, polemicists in various regions and eras felt that there was a connection between a religion of truth and people of truth, between ethical doctrine and ethical praxis. R. Joseph Kimhi pointed to the ethical superiority of the Jews, and his Christian opponent (according to the Jewish record of the debate) was forced to admit that this was correct, but he countered with the response that even such ethical behavior was useless without the proper faith.¹¹ A re-working of this passage appears in an Ashkenazic manuscript from the fourteenth century, which also includes considerable material from the school of Yosef ha-Meqanne and from the traditions that were incorporated into *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*.¹² These two polemical works, as well as *Milhemet Mizvah* by

to the rabbis of Marseilles; the difference is that Maimonides says that the Jews stopped studying the art of war because they trusted in astrologically based fantasies. Pines attempts to draw connections between the arguments of Maimonides, Polgar, and Spinoza in another article: "Al Sugyot Ahadot ha-Kelulot be-Sefer Ezer ha-Dat le-Yitzhak Polgar ve-Tiqbolot la-hen etzel Spinoza," in J. Dan and J. Hacker (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy, and Ethical Literature* (Jubilee Volume for Isaiah Tishby) (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 423–443. The argument that the loss of the art of war among the Jews was due to an entirely positive phenomenon is found only in Polgar. I believe that there is a strong connection between Polgar's argument and one of the theses that appears repeatedly in Solomon ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah*. Ibn Verga too is inclined to naturalistic explanations of the suffering of the exile, and he too presents a description of Jews who are unprepared to defend themselves from their enemies. For naturalistic explanations of the suffering of the Jews, see *Sefer Shevet Yehudah*, ed. by A. Shochet and Y. Baer (Jerusalem, 1947), pp. 40–44, 127–128; Ibn Verga discusses the Jews' ignorance of military affairs on p. 44, and their cowardice on p. 28. On the motif of Jewish cowardice, see E. Gutwirth, "Gender, History and the Jewish-Christian Polemic," ed. by O. Limor and G. G. Stroumsa, *Contra Judaeos* (Tübingen, 1996), p. 265.

¹¹ *Sefer ha-Berit u-Vikkuhei Radaq im ha-Nazrut*, ed. by A. Talmage, Jerusalem 1974, pp. 25–28. On this passage, see B. Sh. Albert, "L'image du chrétien dans les sources juives du Languedoc (XIII–XIVe Siècle)," in *Les Juifs à Montpellier et dans le Languedoc du Moyen Age à nos jours*, ed. by C. Iancu (Montpellier, 1988), pp. 118–119.

¹² Y. Rosenthal, "Vikkuah Dati bein Hakham be-Shem Menahem u-bein ha-Mumar ve-ha-Nazir ha-Dominiquani Pablo Christiani," in *Hagut Ivrit ha-America*, ed. by M. Zohori, A. Tartakower, and H. Ormian (Tel-Aviv, 1974), p. 67. Despite the title, the text is not actually a debate between Pablo Christiani and a Jew named Menahem. See the introduction to my book (above, note 3), p. 36, n. 104; and also J. E. Rembaum, "A Reevaluation of a Medieval Polemical Manuscript," *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 81–99.

R. Meir of Narbonne, an Ashkenazic compilation attributed to R. Moses of Salerno, the Tosafistic commentary *Da'at Zeqenim* on the Pentateuch, and Nahmanides' *Sefer ha-Ge'ullah* all view the expression "a degenerate nation" in Deuteronomy 32:21 as referring to the Christians. In the words of *Yosef ha-Meqanne*: "If there were any nation more degenerate than you, it would be the one to subjugate us."¹³

It is specifically in Ashkenazic polemics that special emphasis is placed on the sins of priests, monks, and nuns. As I have noted with great brevity in my introduction to the *Nizzazon Yashan*, it seems to me that this fierce attack flows from a feeling of Jewish discomfort in the face of religious self-sacrifice by gentiles.¹⁴ Of course, abstention from sexual life is problematic from the perspective of Jewish law and the Jewish worldview, but the impressive phenomenon of the ability of Christians to conquer their own natural drives in order to fulfill the will of their creator must have weakened, if only slightly, the Jewish self-image of absolute moral superiority to the degenerate gentile.

This understanding of the polemical sources cannot be proven conclusively from the texts, for one could hardly expect medieval Jews to express such a feeling explicitly and openly. Nevertheless, we find such a psychological reaction expressly attested in other genres of literature, or in later eras. A substantial exegetical tradition regarding the Book of Jonah explained the prophet's flight from God as being due to a concern that the residents of Nineveh might repent, and thus cause disaster to befall the Jews, who stubbornly refused to repent of their evil ways.¹⁵ In the book *Shivhei ha-Besht (The Praises of the Baal Shem Tov)*, we find a story in which the founder of Hasidism succeeds in implanting sinful thoughts into the mind of an old Catholic priest, such that the priest, who has never had such an experience before, has a seminal emission. The Ba'al Shem Tov does this because he has been informed by heaven that the prayers of the Jewish people on Yom Kippur would not be accepted as long as there was still a priest in that area who remained pure.¹⁶ Although no such passage is found in the polemical literature of

¹³ *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, p. 62; *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, English section, p. 75. References to the other relevant sources can be found in my notes there, English section, pp. 257, 262–263.

¹⁴ *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, Introduction, p. 27.

¹⁵ See, for example, Rashi's commentary on Jonah 1:3.

¹⁶ *Sefer Shivhei ha-Besht*, ed. Sh. A. Horodezky (Tel-Aviv 1947), pp. 163–164.

medieval Ashkenaz, the emphasis on the chasm between the disgusting gentiles and the moral Jews appears quite often in this literature, and leaves little room for doubt that it had great psychological significance for the authors of these texts.¹⁷

The Jewish argument that the Christian world was engaged in immoral behavior focused mainly on behavior that both Jews and Christians viewed as improper; this is typical polemical method. However, it is evident that Jewish condemnation of Christian immorality also rested on an additional consideration, to wit, the persecution of the Jewish people. And so—Christians believe in a false religion, defile themselves through abominable sins, and persecute the chosen people. What then will be their ultimate destiny?

THE DESTINY

Personal destiny

The question of destiny has two dimensions. On the one hand, there is the personal destiny of each individual Christian after death; on the other, there is the collective destiny of “the Kingdom of Edom” and its inhabitants at the End of Days. In general, the Ashkenazic polemical writers answered the question of the Christian’s personal destiny very sharply indeed: a Christian is destined to hell. There is nothing innovative or surprising about this, but we should note the reasoning that is given for it: the Christian deserves this punishment not because he hates the Jews, but because he believes in the Christian faith. In certain periods, when the ideal of tolerance began to develop, some Jews began to consider Christians to be “righteous gentiles,” who fulfill the seven Noahide commandments; however, Talmudic tradition includes the prohibition of idolatry among these seven, and in accordance with a straightforward understanding of this prohibition, it is hard to escape the conclusion that one who worships Jesus as a god commits idolatry.

¹⁷ See my observations in *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, English section, pp. 257–258. In a Sephardic polemical work from the fifteenth century, we find a horrifying depiction of Christian immoral behavior; see Hayyim ibn Musa, *Magen va-Romah* (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 82–83. This passage has recently been noted by Gutwirth (above, n. 10), p. 267. See H. Graetz’s *History* in Sh. P. Rabbinowitz’s Hebrew translation, *Divrei Yemei Yisrael* (Warsaw, 1906), p. 419.

Sefer Nizzahon Yashan reports a conversation between R. Nathan Official and a group of priests on the topic of the sin of the golden calf. According to the sharp formulation in this report—the version in *Yosef ha-Meqanne* is more moderate—R. Nathan emphasized that the generation of Moses received a harsh punishment because they made the error of believing that “the spirit of God” could enter as pure and clean a substance as gold. Yet the Christians do not understand to what degree

they will be judged and entrapped in hell. Why, an a fortiori argument applies here: They [the generation of Moses] erred in worshiping a clean thing like gold, and yet their iniquity was marked before God, who said, “When I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins” [Exod. 32:34] and refused to grant them complete forgiveness. Certainly, then, you who err in saying that something holy entered into a woman in that stinking place, . . . will certainly be consumed by “a fire not blown” [Job 20:26] and descend to deepest hell.¹⁸

It is quite interesting that R. Nathan is not faithful to the Talmudic principle of *dayyo la-ba min ha-din lihyot ka-nidon* (when making an a fortiori argument, one can only argue that the consequences of the severe case are *as severe* as those of the light case, not *more severe*); rather, he jumps straight from the fact that God “refused complete forgiveness” to the worshippers of the calf to the statement that the Christians will “descend to deepest hell.” In any event, it is their theological error, or, in other words, their violation of the prohibition of idolatry, that leads the Christians to perdition.

In the Disputation of Paris, there is a discussion of this question that constitutes an exception that proves the rule. Nicholas Donin quoted

¹⁸ *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, English section, p. 68. It must be emphasized that when R. Nathan says that the worshippers of the calf believed that “the spirit of God” entered it, he is not saying that they believed that the calf was a god. This distinction is explicitly made in *Yosef ha-Meqanne*: “No one ever believed such a thing; they did not err by saying that the calf was a god.” Nevertheless, he goes on, “See what happened to them: ‘There fell of the people that day about three thousand men’ (Exod. 32:28), and it is written, ‘In the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them’” (ibid., verse 34). And it is written, “Therefore he said that he would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen stood before him in the breach’ (Psalms 106:23) (*Yosef ha-Meqanne*, p. 50). This passage in *Yosef ha-Meqanne* does not speak of hell, but the work does speak of hell elsewhere: “What is your fate? [The answer is,] You shall ‘be for burning, for fuel of fire’ [Isaiah 9:4]. You shall all descend to hell” (p. 76).

a Talmudic statement condemning heretics (*minim*) to eternal hellfire. When R. Yehiel responded that the passage in question refers not to Christians but to people who deny the validity of the oral Torah, Donin pointed to Rashi's comment on the passage, which considers the disciples of Jesus to be a classic example of "heretics."¹⁹ R. Yehiel replied that there is no need to accept Rashi's comment as determinative, but even if we do accept it, it is speaking of Jesus' original disciples, who were Jewish, and therefore obligated to observe the Torah's commandments. Gentile Christians, on the other hand, "will not suffer *such a severe* hell."

The bishops went on to ask if Judaism believes that Christians could be saved through their religion. "The rabbi responded: 'Let me tell you a way that you can be saved even through your faith. If you observe the seven commandments that you have been commanded, you will be saved through them.' The bishops rejoiced, and responded: 'Indeed, we have ten!'"²⁰ The rabbi replied: "That is fine with me."²¹

We see that even when R. Yehiel was under severe pressure, he refused to say explicitly that Christians have a share in the world to come. He began by saying that the Christians may have a slightly cooler hell than the actual followers of Jesus (who were apostate Jews), and then went on to point out that observance of the seven Noahide commandments are a medium through which gentiles can save their souls, but he avoided an explicit statement as to whether or not a Christian violates one of those commandments, to wit, the prohibition of idolatry, by virtue of his Christianity; he leaves it to the bishops themselves to issue a ruling in their favor. It is true that the expression "you can be saved even through your faith," which R. Yehiel pronounced as if the proverbial demon was compelling him, does indicate that one can believe in Christianity while still observing the seven Noahide commandments, but a careful reading of the passage as a whole nonetheless reveals the deeply entrenched belief of Ashkenazic Jewry that the Christian is condemned to hell.

R. Yehiel, then, avoids a direct engagement with the question of the status of a gentile who believes in Jesus' divinity yet still wants to be counted among those who observe the seven Noahide Commandments.

¹⁹ *B. Rosh Ha-shanah* 17a, and Rashi ad loc. (See the variants in *Diqduqei Soferim*.)

²⁰ MS Moscow (folio 96b) and MS Oxford (folio 10a) read: "Indeed, they have definitely been commanded to us, and we observe (or will observe) them," though each of these texts has its own scribal error in its presentation of this variant.

²¹ *Vikkuah Rabbenu Yehiel mi-Paris*, ed. by R. Margoliot (Lvov [1868]), pp. 22–23.

However, Meir ben Simon of Narbonne was not deterred from confronting the question directly and explicitly. In his book *Milhemet Mizvah*, he reports that a Christian asked precisely the same question that the bishops asked R. Yehiel. In this debate, the Jew responds to the Christian that the gentiles are obligated to observe the seven Noahide commandments, one of which is to believe

“that the universe has a creator, who is one, true, primeval, and without beginning or end, and that he watches over all his creations, to repay the actions of each one.” The Christian responded: “Yes—we, too, believe that.” The Jew said: “And yet, if you were to ask one who believes this who this creator is and he would say that he is a certain man, born of a woman, who has undergone all bodily vicissitudes including death, such a believer would be one who denies the creator of the universe if his assertion is untrue, and he would be condemned to hell.”²²

Collective destiny

The picture is much more complicated when we look at the question of the collective destiny of the gentiles at the end of days. Yuval’s article paints a sharp, almost polar contrast between the “avenging redemption” in Ashkenazic eschatology versus the “conversionary redemption” in Sephardic eschatology.²³ The Jews of Ashkenaz looked forward to a divine campaign by the Master of the Universe wrapped in his royal robe drenched in the blood of generations of martyrs, a campaign that would visit utter destruction upon all the nations. By contrast, Jews of

²² W. Herskowitz (ed.), *Judeo-Christian Dialogue in Provence as Reflected in Milhemet Mizvah of R. Meir ha-Meili*, D.H.L. dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1974, p. 111. Herskowitz’s text is based on MS Parma, 43b. The question of Christianity’s status as idolatry comes up in a number of places in Jacob Katz’s book *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York, 1961). See also what I have written in my articles, “Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography: Yehzkel Kaufmann’s Account of Jesus and Early Christianity,” in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures*, ed. by L. Landman (New York, 1990), pp. 150–153; and “Christians, Gentiles, and the Talmud: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Response to the Attack on Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, ed. by B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 124–127.

²³ Yuval, pp. 34–50. For example, he regards as exceptional the assertion in an Ashkenazic liturgical poem (by Rabbenu Gershom of Mainz) that “all inhabitants of the universe / will say out loud together: Behold, there is no god in the world / other than that of Israel, whose redeemer is strong” (p. 34).

other regions looked forward to a mass conversion of all residents of the world. In a critical response to Yuval's position, Avraham Grossman pointed to Ashkenazic sources that describe conversion at the end of days; he concluded that Yuval's article does identify a genuine, significant contrast but characterizes it too sharply.²⁴ In a response to Grossman's review, Yuval clarified his position. When all the dust settled—after the initial article, the critique, and the rejoinder—there emerged a conclusion apparently acceptable to both scholars: although the emphasis on vengeance was much stronger in Ashkenaz, even there the avenging redemption was considered only the first stage of the eschatological process; the second stage is that of the conversionary redemption.

There is certainly a large degree of truth in this conception. Nevertheless, I believe that with respect to a number of fundamental points, it requires clarification, expansion, and qualification. If the impression created by Yuval's initial article was too strong, I think that the position emerging from the subsequent exchange is too mild. In the overwhelming majority of sources, there is no true universal conversion that turns the gentiles at the end of days into "an inseparable part of the Jewish people."²⁵ The remaining gentiles do adopt a belief in one God, but they remain separate from and inferior to the Chosen People, accept its authority, and serve it. Some sources even speak of the total destruction of an entire sector of the human race, rather than just the death of many gentiles.

Conversion:

We read in tractate *Avodah Zarah*:

It has been taught: R. Yosi says, "In the time to come, the nations of the world will come and convert." (But will we accept them?) Has it not been taught: In the days of the Messiah proselytes will not be accepted, just as they were not accepted in the days of David or Solomon?—Rather, they will be self-made proselytes. [Rashi comments: they will convert of their own volition, but we will not accept them, because they are converting only

²⁴ A. Grossman, "Ha-Ge'ullah ha-Megayyeret' be-Mishnatam shel Hakhmei Ashkenaz ha-Rishonim," *Zion* 59 (1994): 325–342. Two of Grossman's proof-texts (the *Aleinu* prayer and the liturgical poem *Ve-Ye'etayyu kol le-Avdekha*) are cited also in Ezra Fleischer's critical review, "Yahasei Yehudim-Nozerim bi-Re'i Aqum" in the same volume of *Zion*, p. 291.

²⁵ Grossman, p. 340.

because they see the exalted position of the Jewish people]. They will place *tefillin* on their foreheads, *tefillin* on their arms, *zizit* on their garments, and a *mezuzah* on their doorways. When they see the battle of Gog and Magog, they will be asked: "For what purpose have you come?" They will respond: "Against the Lord, and against His anointed one." As it is said: "Why do the heathen rage, and the nations speak vainly?" (Psalms 2:1) At that moment, each one of them will remove his religious object and leave, as it is said: "Let us remove their chains" (Psalms 2:3).²⁶

It is true that not every messianic vision must be bound by this Talmudic passage. Maimonides explicitly says: "The Sages did not have an authoritative tradition regarding these matters; rather, they [tried to determine the events of the end of days] from their own understanding of scriptural verses, and they therefore disagreed with each other about these matters."²⁷ Medieval Jews who envisioned the events of the end of days generally conducted themselves in accordance with this approach, even if they did not consciously embrace it. Nevertheless, the text affirming that proselytes will not be accepted in the time of the Messiah is a halakhic statement, which therefore had a normative status even among the followers of Maimonides' approach. There is one late medieval polemic in which the question comes up explicitly. R. Solomon ben Simon Duran reads certain scriptural verses as indicating that gentiles will convert in the future, and he notices the contradiction between these verses and the rabbinic ruling. He resolves the apparent contradiction by concluding that the verses are speaking not of conversion to the status of *ger zedeq* (one who becomes a full member of the Jewish people), but merely that of *ger toshav* (one who accepts the seven Noahide commandments).²⁸

It goes without saying that the halakhic lens is not sufficient to provide a full understanding of the various perspectives on the process of redemption. The citation of the rabbinic ruling in Solomon ben Simon Duran's polemic is exceptional; as we have noted, writers on eschatology did not feel bound by the Talmudic tradition in all its details. Nevertheless, we see from here that the word "proselyte" (*ger*) covers three different categories (true proselyte, *ger toshav*, and "self-made proselyte"), and the verb "to convert" (*lehitgayyer*) does not necessarily mean becoming

²⁶ B. *Avodah Zarah* 3b; cf. also B. *Yevamot* 24b.

²⁷ *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2.

²⁸ *Milhemet Mizvah*, published with *Keshet u-Magen le-R. Shim'on ben Zemah Duran* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 37b.

an integral part of the Jewish people. Moreover, the rabbinic ruling in question does not play a significant role in messianic texts not only because of the ideational flexibility that excused messianic visionaries from confronting problems emerging from the Talmud; the majority of these texts did not need to deal with the halakhic problem because it never occurred to their authors that in the final stage of the redemption all gentiles would become Jews in the full sense of the term.

In another Talmudic passage, we find the position that became the predominant one among medieval Jews:

Ulla contrasted two scriptural verses: It is written, "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord will wipe away tears from off all faces" (Isaiah 25:8); yet it is also written: "For the child shall die a hundred years old" (ibid. 65:20). . . . There is no contradiction—this verse [stating that people will be immortal] refers to the Jewish people, and the other verse [stating that people will die only at a ripe old age] refers to the nations of the world. But why will the nations of the world be there? As it is written [or "This refers to those of whom it is written"]: "And foreigners shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers" (ibid. 61:5).²⁹

The first half of this passage is cited in the Disputation of Paris as an example of contradictory verses in Scripture that force us to turn to the Talmud for a resolution. The second half appears at that point in the margin of the Hamburg manuscript, though with no explicit reference to our question.³⁰ In any event, this is a Talmudic passage that explicitly poses the question of whether the gentiles will survive at the end of days, and it answers that they—or some of them—will remain alive in order to serve the Jewish people.

In *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, which serves, as we shall see, as a source of the most extreme form of the idea of apocalyptic vengeance against the gentiles, we find a sharp passage about the servitude of the gentiles.

²⁹ *B. Sanhedrin* 61b. Cf. also *B. Pesahim* 68a, as well as the following passage: "All the gentiles who are still on the earth at the time of the Messiah will go to the Land of Israel, and bring grain and bread and sustenance into the houses of the Jewish people, and make the Jews very wealthy" (*Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah* 20 [Ish-Shalom's edition, p. 113]).

³⁰ *Vikkuah Rabbenu Yehiel mi-Paris*, p. 13; Hamburg ms., p. 73a. (In the manuscript, the Talmudic passage is cited according to the variant, "This refers to those of whom it is written," rather than merely "It is written." This may indicate that only a few gentiles are expected to survive.)

As a reflection of the self-image of Ashkenazic Jewry, this passage is remarkable, for it describes a situation of Jewish social and economic superiority *at the present time*, i.e., in thirteenth-century Ashkenaz, and presents this “fact” as self evident. However, the passage does not limit its discussion to the present; it clearly refers also to the future, when the gentiles will continue (!) to serve the Jewish people. In the merit of their servitude—and in this merit alone—they will have some “slight hope”:

They bark their assertion that it is improper for the uncircumcised and impure to serve Jews. Tell them: On the contrary, if not for the fact that they serve Jews they would have been condemned to destruction, for it is written in Isaiah, “Arise, shine, for your light has come For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted” (Isa. 60:1, 12). On the other hand, as long as they serve Israel they have some hope, as it is written, “And strangers shall stand and tend your flock, and the sons of foreigners shall be your farmers and vintners” (Isa. 61:5); consequently, they should serve us all the time, so that they may fulfill the prophecy, “The elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). It was for this reason that the Torah said, “You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you shall give it to the stranger that is in your gates, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a gentile” (Deut. 14:21). The Torah told us to sell such meat to gentiles because they will serve us, and God does not withhold the reward of any creature. This, in fact, is what we do; we give over to them the animals which are ritually unfit for our use, and we sell them the hind portions of animals for this same reason.³¹

The hope that the gentiles would serve the Jews can be found outside Ashkenaz as well. In Grossman’s above-mentioned article, he cites a salient example from R. Saadya Gaon’s philosophical work, which asserts explicitly that “those who correct their behavior by entering into the Torah of Israel” will serve the Jews at the end of days “in their homes . . . in city and village work, . . . in the fields and in the wilderness . . . The rest will return to their own land, but under the dominion of the Jewish people.”³²

There are, it is true, a number of sources, mainly from outside of Ashkenaz, that speak according to their straightforward meaning of a massive conversion to Judaism at the end of days. It is not my wish

³¹ *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, p. 207.

³² *Sefer ha-Emunot ve-he-De’ot* (Constantinople [1562]), folio 68b, cited in Grossman, p. 339.

to force all the numerous, varied texts that address the destiny of the gentiles into a procrustean bed and to artificially impose ideological agreement between them, but it is possible that even these sources are not speaking of complete integration of the gentiles into the Jewish people. Rav Hai Gaon, for example, writes, “The remaining nations will convert, as it is said: ‘For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord’ (Zephaniah 3:9), and it is said: ‘They will say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem’ (Isaiah 2:3). When they come before the Messiah, he will order them to end all fighting and wars.”³³ However, Rav Hai was well aware of the Talmudic passage from tractate *Avodah Zarah* (“In the time to come, the nations of the world will come and convert . . . ; they will be self-made proselytes”), and it is quite possible that the gentiles described here are expected to retain their separate national identity.³⁴

Even the interesting Ashkenazic sources presented by Grossman do not seem to be examples of texts predicting a conversion so complete that the gentiles become “an inseparable part of the Jewish people.” In three places, Grossman himself points out formulations indicating that the gentiles “will not reach the high level of the Jewish people”.³⁵ If we briefly survey the other sources, we will see that the conclusions emerging from them do not contradict this affirmation.

³³ Yehuda ibn Shmuel, *Midreshei Ge'ullah* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, 1954), pp. 139–140. Part of this passage is quoted by Yuval, p. 45.

³⁴ The first source that Yuval cites as an example of “conversionary redemption” is one in which the gentiles accept the beliefs of the Jews, but it does not necessarily refer to “conversion” in the full sense of the word. (“All the nations will accept our faith, and say that they have inherited falsehood from their ancestors . . . for all the nations will turn to belief in the glorious God, after having seen all the wonders that he performs when he rescues us from this exile”—R. Simon of Narbonne, *Milhemet Mizvah*, Parma ms., pp.19b–20a; cited in Yuval, p. 34.) There is one passage in *Derashot ha-Ran* that seems to say that the gentiles will become completely integrated into the Jewish people at the end of days. Even here, I do not think that this understanding of the text is absolutely unavoidable, but the truth is that anyone who wishes to escape this conclusion must provide a forced interpretation. See *Derashot ha-Ran*, ed. by A. L. Feldman (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 121, and D. Schwartz, *Ha-Ra'ayon ha-Meshihi be-Hagut ha-Yehudit bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* (Ramat-Gan, 1997), p. 182.

³⁵ Grossman, p. 334 (regarding Rashi on Isaiah 42), and cf. p. 330 (regarding the liturgical poem *Eimat Nore'otekha*) and p. 337 (regarding Rashi on Zechariah 9:1).

Rashi's commentary on Isaiah 14:1 does speak of true proselytes, but it is clear that these individuals are not to be identified with the totality of the gentiles who remain during the final phase of the redemption. On the contrary, the following verse informs us that after the conversion of these gentiles, the remaining nations will take the Jewish people "to [the Jews'] own territory, and the Jewish people will take them as an inheritance upon God's land, as male and female slaves, and they will plunder those who had plundered them, and dominate those who had oppressed them."

Rashi's commentary on Isaiah 56, too, speaks of true proselytes, but it refers to the individuals who convert before the final stage of the redemption, and perhaps even over the course of the years of the exile. This is clear from Rashi's words in his commentary on verse 3: "Let not the foreigner say: 'Why should I convert? Will not God remove me from his people *when he pays them their reward?*'" I believe that R. Joseph Qara's commentary on the chapter should be understood the same way.

Rashi's commentary on Zechariah 13:8–9 does speak of true proselytes, or rather of a group of Judaizing gentiles, a subset of which will ultimately be accepted as true proselytes. However, the initial conversion of these individuals is to take place before "the suffering associated with the birth-pangs of the Messiah and the wars of Gog and Magog." It is precisely through these many tribulations that these converts will be tested. The majority of them "will return to their straying ways, and join with the forces of Gog, as we find in an *aggadah*,"³⁶ but a minority will survive the test, and become part of the Jewish people. This is hardly a description of a massive conversion of the gentiles after the stage of the avenging redemption.

I must emphasize that the question that I am raising is not the central point in the articles by Yuval or Grossman. Yuval is interested in the contrast between the sources that foresee the destruction of the gentiles and those that foresee their acceptance of the faith of the Jews, and Grossman is interested in proving that even the Ashkenazic vision of the redemption does not affirm that the gentiles will be totally destroyed. In neither case is the nature of the "conversion" the central point; indeed,

³⁶ Rashi appears to be referring to the passage in *B. Avodah Zarah* 3b, which I have already quoted above.

from a narrow vantage point, it is not relevant at all to their concerns. However, there is no doubt that this question is of great importance for a deep understanding of the relationship between the Jews and their neighbors, and a reader who has been following the scholarly exchange sparked by Yuval's initial article will be exposed to an inaccurate impression that envisions the utter erasure of the boundaries between Israel and the nations at the end of days. In fact, the Jews of the Middle Ages felt at the deepest level of their consciousness that the uniqueness of the Jewish people would remain even at the end of days.

P u n i s h m e n t:

According to the common conclusion that Yuval and Grossman have reached at the current state of their exchange, even the Ashkenazim did not hope for the total destruction of all gentiles. In Grossman's words: "The Jews did not believe that all of their gentile neighbors were destined to be wiped out. There was a core of good people ensconced among them, who would ultimately convert to Judaism, either personally or through their descendants."³⁷

Here, too, I think that there are sources meriting renewed attention that will not undermine this assertion entirely but will add a sharper and more hostile perspective. Let us begin with a passage from the *Tanna de-Bei Eliyyahu*:

I was once travelling from one town to another, and I found a certain old man. He asked me: "Master, will there be gentiles at the time of the Messiah?" I told him: "My son, all the nations and kingdoms that tormented and oppressed the Jewish people will come and see the happiness of the Jews, and turn to dust, and never return, as it is said: 'The wicked shall see it, and be grieved' (Psalms 112:10); and it is said: 'And you shall leave your name for a curse unto my chosen' (Isaiah 65:15). And all the kingdoms and nations that have not tormented or oppressed the Jews will come and serve as farmers and vineyard-keepers for the Jews, as it is said: 'And strangers shall stand and tend your flock, and the sons of foreigners shall be your farmers and vintners . . . and you shall be called the Lord's priests' (Isaiah 61:5-6); and it is said: 'For then will I turn to the people a pure language' (Zephaniah 3:9); and it is said: 'And he will call his servants by a different name' (Isaiah 65:15)—these verses refer to those gentiles worthy of living

³⁷ Grossman, p. 340.

in the time of the Messiah. You might think that because they are going to remain alive in the time of the Messiah, they will also merit the World to Come. You must, therefore, set aside the words I have just spoken and give heed to the words of the Torah, which are more severe than the words that I have just said. The Torah says: 'No uncircumcised individual shall eat of [the paschal sacrifice]' (Exodus 12:48). If this is so of such a minor matter as the paschal sacrifice, surely it should be so of the World to Come, which is the holiest matter of all. No uncircumcised individual shall ever, ever eat in it, nor ever, ever, dwell in it."³⁸

We see then that according to the first approach cited here, the more "liberal" one, the nations that have oppressed the Jews will completely perish; and according to the second, more severe approach, all of the gentiles—or perhaps only all of the uncircumcised gentiles—will disappear from the world.³⁹

As an example of the avenging redemption, Yuval cites an abbreviated version of a passage from *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* that according to its straightforward meaning describes the total destruction of all the gentiles. Here is the full passage:

The heretics harass us by noting that God has delayed the end of this exile longer than those of the others. But this is not surprising, for God does not punish a nation until the measure of its sins has been filled, as it is written, "In a measure, when it is sent forth you will contend with it" (Isa. 27:8). Similarly, he told Abraham, "And the fourth generation shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete (Gen. 15:16), and I do not wish to destroy the Amorites until their measure has been filled." That is why that exile lasted only four hundred years, for in that period of time the measure of two nations—the Egyptians and the Amorites—was filled, and they became deserving of destruction; it should be noted, furthermore, that it took a long time for it to be filled since it dates back to the generation when nations were separated. Now, until the generation when the Babylonian exile ended there was no further destruction of any

³⁸ *Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah* (22) 20 (Ish-Shalom's edition, pp. 120–121). Cf. also above, n. 29.

³⁹ Ish-Shalom (ad loc., note 13) expresses the view that the text is referring only to uncircumcised gentiles. For another example of such a distinction, see *Tosafot* on *Avodah Zarah* 10b, s.v. *Vai lah le-ilfa*. Cf. also *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, p. 17, on Ezekiel 32. In verse 29 there, Ezekiel informs us that Edom will descend into a pit full of uncircumcised men ("There is Edom . . . and all its princes"), and the author of *Yosef ha-Meqanne* points out: "The Jews, the circumcised nation, will not be there." Here, the distinction is clearly between the Jewish people and the gentiles, not between circumcised and uncircumcised gentiles.

nation, and that redemption was also not accomplished “with a high hand”; indeed, that is why the exile lasted only seventy years. This redemption, however, will involve the ruin, destruction, killing, and eradication of all the nations, them, and the angels who watch over them, and their gods, as it is written, “The Lord shall punish the heavenly host in heaven and the kings of the earth on earth” (Isa. 24:21). Jeremiah too said, “Fear not, my servant Jacob, said the Lord, for I am with you; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven you, but with you I will not make a full end” (Jer. 46:28).⁴⁰

It is true that we have seen above that the author of *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* does speak of a “slight hope” for the gentiles who will serve the Jewish people, but the book is largely an anthology of anti-Christian arguments from various sources, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that whoever wrote our passage looked forward to the total destruction of all the gentiles. The author no doubt recited *Ve-ye’etayu kol le-ovdekha* (see note 21) in the High Holiday service, but when he wrote these lines, this element of the eschatological vision disappeared entirely from his consciousness.⁴¹

Though the expectation that all the gentiles would be utterly destroyed was rare even in Ashkenaz, the hope for the total destruction of the Kingdom of Edom, i.e., Christendom, was undoubtedly quite common—and not just in Ashkenaz.

⁴⁰ *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, p. 227. It is possible that the use of the word *kelayah* (“destruction”) with reference to the Egyptians, who were not completely destroyed, can mitigate the impression created by this passage. However, the tone of the passage is so strong that I hesitate to suggest a moderate interpretation.

⁴¹ In Rashi’s commentary on *Sanhedrin* 111a, s.v. *amar Resh Laqish* and s.v. *la niha lehu*, he suggests two explanations of the Talmudic passage: one in the name of his teacher, and one which he thinks is preferable. The first explanation raises the possibility that all the gentiles will perish, and only (part of) the Jewish people will survive. We need to be very careful about reaching any conclusions about the worldview of a commentator from his remarks on a difficult passage that he is struggling to interpret. Nevertheless, we may not completely ignore the fact that this commentary explicitly states that such a total destruction is in the realm of possibility. (Even if Rashi is not the author of the commentary on this chapter of *Sanhedrin* that is attributed to him, it was definitely written in the Ashkenazic sphere of culture no later than the twelfth century.) See also *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, p. 58: “A priest from Etampes once asked me, ‘Do you really believe that the entire population of the world will perish, and you, the smallest nation, will merit life in the World to Come?’ I replied, ‘Is it not written: “It was not because you were more in number than any of the peoples that the Lord set his love on you or chose you, for you were the fewest [of all peoples]” (Deut. 7:7)?’”

We find the following in a passage in *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* that is partly parallel to the one we have just cited:

You have no shame in saying of him who spoke and the world came to be, of him who lives forever, that he accepted death and suffering for you. Why, Moses said in the name of God, “Lo, I raise my hand to heaven and say: As I live forever . . .” (Deut. 32:40), and David, Elijah, and Daniel all swore by the life of God. Moreover, it is written, “See then, that I, I am he; there is no god beside me” (Deut. 32:39); yet you say that he has a partner, that there are two, nay, three gods. Know clearly that God will exact revenge from you, as it is written, “For the Lord will vindicate his people and take revenge for his servants . . . O nations, acclaim his people! For he will avenge the blood of his servants” (Deut. 32:36, 43). And Jeremiah said, “But fear not, O my servant Jacob, and be not dismayed, O Israel . . . for I am with you; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven you, but I will not make a full end of you” (Jer. 46:27–28; 30:10–11). Furthermore, he promised us, “But fear not, O my servant Jacob, and be not dismayed, O Israel, for, behold, I will save you from afar off and your seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return and be in rest and at ease, and none shall make him afraid” (Jer. 46:27; 30:10), but none of the house of Esau shall remain or escape (cf. Obadiah 1:18).⁴²

Here, too, we find a description of total destruction, but this time it is specifically directed toward the House of Esau. In this context, we should pay attention to the full citation from Jeremiah: “all the nations *whither I have driven you*.” It is difficult to conjecture what the author’s attitude might have been regarding the fate of the inhabitants of the Lands of Ishmael to which God had driven Jews—it is doubtful that the question entered his mind when he wrote these words—but it is clear that he did not believe that the gentiles in the far-off islands, where no Jews lived, would be destroyed. To resort to a formulation in *Ve-ye’etayu kol le-ovdekha*, those straying peoples who will learn wisdom at the end of days “will tell of your righteousness in the islands”—but not in Europe. In the Christian world, there will be total destruction. This will occur for two reasons. The primary reason, according to this passage, is Christian theology—God will not tolerate the embarrassment caused to him by the people who declare that he has a partner, or that he has undergone death and suffering. The line “God will exact revenge from

⁴² *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, pp. 75–76.

you” at first seems to be referring to revenge for this embarrassment, but the passage immediately quotes a scriptural verse about vengeance with a different motive—avenging the “blood of His servants.” In another passage, the author of *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* says to the Christians: “The Lord your God will place these curses upon your enemies and foes who have persecuted you’ (Deut. 30:7)—you [Christians] are included among these, and therefore we cannot become one people, for we are inscribed for life, and you for death, for you are our enemies and persecutors.”⁴³ Persecution of Israel and idolatrous audacity directed at God go hand in hand to lead Christians to their ultimate destruction.

It seems to me that a passage from the Ashkenazic *Treatise concerning the Date of the Redemption* quoted in Yuval’s article as an example of the anticipation of “the destruction of all the nations” in fact reflects a distinction between the nations in general and Edom in particular. The passage does begin by speaking of vengeance against “the nations,” but the continuation is revealing::

During those thirty-five years (1317–1352 CE), there will be a fulfillment of the scriptural passage, “You will be raised up next to princes, and kings will serve you as nurses” (cf. Isaiah 49:22–23)—for the kings of the nations will see the vengeance that God has carried out against them for the sake of the Jewish people, and they will see the ingathering of the exiles . . . And in that year . . . which is the year 5112 (1352 CE), this nation will entirely disappear, and Jerusalem will be built.⁴⁴

In this passage, God takes “vengeance” against the nations in general, but brings total destruction to “this nation.”

⁴³ Ibid., p. 127. Similarly, *Yosef ha-Meqanne* (p. 87) writes that the punishment of Edom, mentioned at the end of the prophecy of Obadiah, will follow from “the afflictions and persecutions that you impose on us in each generation.” Compare also the collection of scriptural verses at the beginning of the book (pp. 15–25) promising consolation to Israel and punishment to the gentiles. There is an Ashkenazic penitential poem for the Eve of Rosh Hashanah that looks to the day when the people of Edom will be destroyed as a consequence of both their idolatry and their persecution of the Jewish people: “May haughty Edom and Moab be blotted out from the book of life, / for they bow before a block of wood, and declare it divine. / Let the wicked oppressor receive no mercy; may he be condemned to destruction, / for he has taunted the legions of the living God.” (In D. Goldschmidt, *Seder ha-Selihot ke-Minhag Lita u-Qehillot ha-Perushim be-Eretz Yisrael* [Jerusalem, 1965], p. 91.)

⁴⁴ A. Marx, “Ma’amar al Shenat ha-Ge’ullah,” in *Ha-Zofeh le-Hokhmat Yisrael* 5 (1921): 197, cited by Yuval, pp. 44–45.

This position appears explicitly in *Sephardic* sources from the late Middle Ages. Simon ben Zemah Duran writes that the prophets envisioned

the destruction of each of these religions [Christianity and Islam] . . . in a manner commensurate with the degree that it has strayed from the truth. For regarding the Christian nation, which pronounced blasphemies against God, the verse says: "And the House of Jacob shall be a fire . . . and not leave any remnant of the House of Esau" (Obadiah 1:18) . . . But we are assured that the Muslim nation, which has humiliated our people and cast truth to the ground, will be humiliated before us as its mother [Hagar] was humiliated before our mother [Sarah].

He goes on to present a long list of scriptural verses reporting how the nations will be abased before Israel at the end of days.⁴⁵

A similar distinction between Edom and the other nations is made in R. Isaac Abravanel's *Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah*; however, for exegetical reasons, he includes Ishmael as well in the group that will be totally destroyed. The main target of God's wrath is Christianity: "The ultimate decree against [the people of Rome, the Fourth Beast in Daniel's vision] will be not on account of their evil deeds, but on account of the strange

⁴⁵ P. Murciano, *Simon ben Zemah Duran, Keshet u-Magen: A Critical Edition*, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1975, pp. 107–108. Yuval (p. 69) points out that "as far as we can tell, the distinction between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim becomes progressively smaller toward the end of the thirteenth century." On eschatological vengeance against the gentiles in a fourteenth-century Sephardic polemic, see Y. Shamir, *Rabbi Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and his Book Ezer Ha-Emunah: A Chapter in the History of the Judeo-Christian Controversy II* (Coconut Grove, Fla., 1972), pp. 83, 84, and cf. p. 86. All the essential components—the decree that Edom will be destroyed, the humiliation of the nations, and their recognition of the God of Israel—appear together in an Ashkenazic liturgical poem, but they are less explicit there. In the poem *Ototekha Ra'inu* by R. Simon bar Isaac, we read that the following will take place on the day of the redemption: "He will visit complete destruction upon Edom . . . when he makes great, eternal joy [for the Jews] . . . He will remove the enemy, and humiliate it, / and pastor his flock in his shadow, / and fell the mighty horns of the gentiles. / They will tell of his loftiness and his military might, / and all will be united to serve him, / when the universe and its fullness will praise him." (See J. Fränkel, *Mahzor Pesah* (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 504–505.) If we take the expression "He will visit complete destruction upon Edom" literally, then the poem is speaking of the total destruction of the Christian world. If so, the enemy who is merely humiliated must be understood as the Muslim world or other gentile nations. However, there is room for one who disagrees with this understanding to argue that the expression, "He will visit complete destruction upon Edom" is poetic exaggeration that allows for some subjugated, monotheistic Christians to appear in the continuation of the passage.

and harsh words and beliefs that the small horn [in Daniel's vision], which refers to the Pope, and the sect of the priests of Jesus, pronounce against God, may he be blessed."⁴⁶ Abravanel continues with a stunning interpretation of Psalms 50:16–23, a passage which he understands as being an admonition to Christian Edom: "Who are you to declare my statutes, or express my covenant in your mouth, seeing that you hate instruction, and cast my words behind you?" (verses 16–17). The Christians will be punished for their perversions of the scriptures, for casting the words of the prophets that refer to the future redemption "behind them," that is, for interpreting them as referring to the past (!). A further punishment will befall them because "You speak against your brother; you slander your mother's son" (verse 20), i.e., they have persecuted the Jewish people, which is called Edom's brother. However, Scripture continues, "These things you have done, and I kept silent. You thought that I was altogether such a one as yourself: I will reprove you and confront you with charges" (verse 21). The "great punishment" will befall Edom on account of the second, "truly monumental sin—that they have spoken against God by attributing humanity and corporeality to him, as if he were one of us."⁴⁷

The first three beasts in Daniel's vision are punished in careful proportion and measure, but the fourth beast, Edom, is punished with "utter extinction," "to be destroyed to the very end." "The Kingdom of Rome—the nation of Edom and the nation of the Ishmaelites who have entered under their governance—will all perish from the face of the earth, and those nations will be totally destroyed."⁴⁸ Abravanel's analysis does not provide a sufficient religious-ethical explanation for why the Ishmaelite nation should be destroyed. The Muslims are completely innocent of the decisive sin that causes the destruction of Edom. However, to their great misfortune, Abravanel is forced to include them in "the Kingdom of Edom," for Daniel's vision includes only four beasts, and not five. It is this exegetical difficulty that sends them to their destruction.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah, Ma'ayan #8, Tamar #8*, in Abravanel, *Perush al Nevi'im u-Ketuvim III* (Tel Aviv, 1960), pp. 346–347.

⁴⁷ P. 348.

⁴⁸ P. 347.

⁴⁹ Abravanel gives a historico-exegetical justification for his inclusion of Ishmael in the Edomite nation in *Ma'ayan #2, Tamar #3*, p. 290.

The presence of a vision of vengeance and destruction alongside a vision of subjugation and recognition of the faith of Israel expresses a tension between two types of prophecies, two traditions, and two psychological needs. On the one hand, there is the desire for radical, absolute, ultimate vengeance against the oppressor; on the other hand, there is the desire to see one's opponent admit his error not for a passing moment but for untold generations. Apparently, the yearning for vengeance occasionally became so powerful that it led to a willingness to forego the desire for an ongoing admission of error entirely. The most prevalent solution, which took varied forms, envisioned the destruction of entire nations or many individuals of those nations, and the survival of the rest in a more or less inferior status, after they recognize that the Lord, God of Israel, is king, and his rule dominates all. Medieval Christian theology viewed the Jews as unwilling witnesses to the truth of Christianity, whereas the Jewish messianic vision viewed the remaining gentiles of the end of days as willing witnesses to the truth of Judaism.⁵⁰

Over the course of this article, we have seen some small sampling of the complex relations between the Jews and their neighbors in the crucible of Christian Europe: images of superiority and inferiority mixed together, visions of destruction on the one hand and of a united faith on the other. We have focused here on hostile relations, but we should not forget that there were also friendly relations in daily life that left their mark even on Ashkenazic polemical literature, especially *Sefer*

⁵⁰ This comparison of the Jewish eschatological vision to the Augustinian doctrine appears in Yuval's article in a slightly different form and is described as the position of the "non-Ashkenazic world" alone. He explains that the survival of non-Jews is "necessary . . . in order to prove the truth of Judaism." If he means that it is *logically* necessary along the lines of the Christian theory, it is hard to accept his statement, for in the days of the Messiah, the truth will be completely clear without any need of external proofs. However, if he means that it is *psychologically* necessary for the persecuted Jews—whether Sephardic or Ashkenazic—I think that his statement has much truth in it. See Yuval, p. 48. It is not impossible that the Christian position that the Jews must be kept alive as living witnesses of the truth of Christianity sheds light on a stanza in a penitential poem recited during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: "We have fallen low, and cannot arise, . . . We sit like false witnesses, / unable to raise our heads" (Goldschmidt [see above, n. 43], p. 179.) It is indeed possible that this is a routine simile asserting that the Jews in exile are as embarrassed as a false witness who has been found out. However, if we read the line in light of the Augustinian doctrine, which an educated Jew would surely have known, the line becomes an impassioned cry, full of pathos.

Yosef ha-Meqanne, and certainly on other genres of literature.⁵¹ Jews and Christians alike were delighted to discern the defects in the other group, but they also, however unwillingly, saw the positive characteristics as well. In the downtrodden Jewish community, both their self-image and their image of the other were formed out of deep personal struggles, and their visions of the ultimate fate of the gentiles reflected a range of theological, exegetical, historical, and psychological considerations that arose out of the depths of the soul of an exiled people. The ironclad faith that the Jew would ultimately be victorious at the end of days made it possible for an oppressed minority to maintain itself even in its contemporary condition, and an examination of the various paths that this faith took can help us understand the remarkable phenomenon that manifests itself before our eyes—not the survival of the gentiles at the end of days, but the survival of the Jews in medieval Europe.

ADDENDUM

About three years after the publication of this article, Reuven Kimelman's excellent study of the mystical meaning of the *Lekhah Dodi* prayer appeared (*Lekhah Dodi ve-Qabbalat Shabbat: ha-Mashma'ut ha-Mistit* [Jerusalem, 2003]). Kimelman, who had not seen my article, devoted a chapter to the stanza beginning, "You shall burst forth to the right and to the left," arguing that it expresses the expectation that Esau and Ishmael will convert to Judaism at the end of days. (All the references cited in this addendum can be found in that chapter.) My first impression was that the sources that he cites provide a body of evidence demonstrating that the expectation of full conversion was more common than I had thought. More careful examination, however, reveals that the dominant

⁵¹ For an excellent example from the Provençal community, see J. Shatzmiller, *Shylock Reconsidered* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1970), pp. 104–122. In this context, let me emphasize a particularly significant point that has emerged from the exchange between Fleischer and Yuval: the vengeance that the Ashkenazim envisioned in their apocalyptic predictions is not carried out by the Jews against their enemies; rather, it plays itself out as an eschatological mission of the God of Israel, who avenges himself and his people. For an evaluation of the central thesis of Yuval's article, see my discussion in *From Crusades to Blood Libels to Expulsions: Some New Approaches to Medieval Antisemitism* (Second Annual Lecture of the V. J. Selmanowitz Chair of Jewish History, Touro College Graduate School of Jewish Studies, New York, 1997).

view in those sources is precisely that of the texts that I had analyzed: the nations of the world will recognize the validity of Judaism without full conversion and persist in a state of subordination to Jews.

One quotation in Kimelman's chapter does appear to look forward to full conversion. The late-thirteenth-century R. Moses of Burgos writes, "All the nations will return to the worship of our Creator may he be blessed and convert so that they will come under the wings of the divine Presence, observing his Torah and serving him wholeheartedly as one . . . for they will all convert for the sake of the Lord, the Eternal God." All the other sources, however, though often using the terms conversion or union with Israel, tell a different story.

Thus, R. Bahya ben Asher in his commentary to Deuteronomy 30:7 asserts that Edom and Ishmael "are destined to join us by converting and becoming one nation, and it is not even necessary to say that the authority and the kingship will return to us." Kimelman's paraphrase merely underscores the tension in this position. "All," he writes, "will convert, and Israel will rule." Shem Tov ben Shem Tov appears to maintain that only Ishmael will convert "because they are closer," a position with which we are of course familiar. Moses de Leon affirms that all nations—indeed all existence—will become one, and yet he goes on to say that all the nations will enter the holy covenant without losing their identity.

R. Shlomo Alkabetz writes that when God will subdue the "princes" (i.e., the cosmic powers) in charge of the nations, those princes will not be destroyed entirely. On the contrary, the nations (as Zechariah prophesies) will come to celebrate the festival of *Sukkot*. They will be enveloped by sanctity, "for the nations are branches and wings for Israel."

The tension is even more explicit in *Sefer ha-Peli'ah*. "Not one of the seventy princes will be uprooted or destroyed; rather, weakness and dryness will develop in them, and the mistress will once again become the mistress and the maidservant a maidservant. For if even one of the seventy princes is uprooted, you have left no possibility for the survival of the world. All the nations will return to bow to our God . . . after they convert." The nations convert—and remain maidservants. And here is ibn Gikatilla: "Because of their great desire to cleave to the Lord may He be blessed they will serve Israel," and they will be united in the faith of Israel.

Thus, as in the some of the texts analyzed in my article, terms like conversion and even union can coexist with servitude and separate national identity.

Finally, after citing Shem Tov's expectation that it is specifically Ishmael who will convert, Kimelman notes without elaboration Abravanel's *Mashmia Yeshu'ah* (*Perush al Nevi'im u-Ketuvim* III, p. 566a). This passage will repay more detailed analysis in light of the author's rather different position in his commentary to Daniel (*Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah*), with which we are already familiar. We recall that in the latter work, Abravanel maintained that although logically Christians and not Muslims should be destroyed at the end of days, the latter will be destroyed as well because the Book of Daniel, as Abravanel understood it, subsumes them under the fourth beast, which is doomed to annihilation. The exegetical imperative overcame the appropriate ethical-religious assessment and condemned Ishmael to destruction.

In *Mashmia Yeshu'ah*, a work of messianic theory, Abravanel was removed from the immediate impact of Daniel and was consequently liberated to follow moral logic to its proper conclusion. Thus, he makes a striking observation about the prophet's famous assertion, "Then I will make the nations pure of speech so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve him with one accord" (Zephaniah 3:9). The verse, he says, does not say "all the nations." The reason for this is that "the nation of Edom is not included in this promise, for they are the enemies of God and his Torah and will not see the [open manifestation] of God's majesty. But the other nations from the descendants of Ishmael who did not pervert the fundamentals of the Torah as much—they will be granted the merit of accepting the divine faith." He makes clear, however, that they too will not reach the level of the Jewish people.

Finally, it is of no small interest that Abravanel goes on to assert that once the dead are resurrected, even the far-flung pagan nations will recognize the true God and serve him. It is the monumental miracle of the resurrection that will enable even those nations who knew nothing of the Torah to take this otherwise inexplicable step. I suspect that Abravanel had in mind Maimonides' well-known affirmation at the end of his *Mishneh Torah* that God brought about the rise and spread of Christianity and Islam to familiarize the nations with the Torah so that they would have the minimal preparation necessary to appreciate and internalize the Messiah's message when he comes. Without this preparation, even eschatological acceptance of the true faith is a monumental challenge, and it is only the witness of the resurrection that makes it possible. Though the Maimonidean passage underlies Abravanel's remarks, it is

noteworthy that the function assigned to Christianity in the *Mishneh Torah* is marginalized or even neutralized entirely once one envisions the eschatological destruction of all Christians.

What is particularly striking about Abravanel's affirmation that pagans will embrace the true faith is that his argument for the destruction of Edom—expressed more fully in *Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah*—was that Christians reject pure monotheism in favor of an essentially idolatrous belief. By this criterion, pagans too should suffer utter annihilation, and yet they will not. "Innocent" idolatry is one thing; the idolatry of "the enemies of God and his Torah" is quite another. Pagans never recognized the God of Israel; Christians did—and turned him into a human being, perverting Scripture along the way. Thus, even the vision of masses of pagans acknowledging the true God cannot mitigate Abravanel's vengeful vision of the fate of Christians.

Despite this argument for the special sinfulness of the Christian faith, it remains difficult to accept the proposition that a cold calculation would have persuaded a medieval Jew that in purely theological terms, the sin of Trinitarian Incarnationism is worse than that of full-fledged polytheism, complete with all the abominations that Scripture associates with it. In the deep recesses of Abravanel's psyche, God's reckoning with Christendom at the end of days will almost surely be driven by concern not only for his own honor but for that of the expelled and persecuted people who suffered so long and so grievously at the hands of the Kingdom of Edom.