

Stephanie Coen  
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The politics of survival for the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews at the times of the Crusades were often closely linked to those medieval communities' understanding of an historical framework which embraced both the past and the future on virtually equal terms. The Jews, confronting an external enemy, structured their lives through the establishment of what Chazan justly calls "patterns of response." These patterns--widely shared within but not between the communities--are noteworthy in part because they encompass death as well as life.

Indeed, the divergent responses to the possibility of death are certainly among the foremost considerations of the study of Jewish action in the face of persecution and forced conversion. Martyrdom, in other words, is a key element of survival, for the word is meant to imply not only the literal survival of the people but also the spiritual survival of the religion. The ramifications both of martyrdom and of the philosophy underlying it are evident even today, and have been incorporated into each generation's successive reading of the historical framework.

For the Ashkenazic Jews, as the threat of the Crusades grew more pressing, martyrdom was elevated from a form of self sacrifice to a means of direct communication with God. It should be noted that martyrdom did not begin as the ideal; the first threats were met on a purely human level, with policies of "repentance, prayer, and charity" and of "spending their moneys and bribing the princes and officers and bishops and burghers." These fall into the realm of material action; even the repentance cycle, used as it was in response to the threat, is less contact with God than man's scrambling <sup>to</sup> give his shattered life a sense of order. As the human level failed, however, martyrdom--spiritual action--essentially became the sole means of ordering chaos, for it reverberated with echos of the past; provided a basis for future action; and, most importantly, carried the persecuted Jew directly to God.

The very existence of a hierarchical structure within the system--death at the hands of the enemy; death at one's own hand; death of others at one's own hand--is evidence of the primary importance martyrdom assumed. It functioned on every level within the Jewish framework of history: it linked the martyrs both to actual and to biblical figures of the past; it provided individuals with a means of making a statement and the community with a form of unified action, thus insuring personal and collective memory; it assured a place "in the circle of the righteous" in the world to come and it gave the martyrs hope that God

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would one day avenge their deaths. At the same time it provided a challenge to a silent and non-active God, one that was of great importance to a suffering people: in face of his indifference, they would not die passively. Whether that message was stated or not, it is implicit in the depth and breadth of communal martyrdom.

Martyrdom did not become for the Sephardic Jews a model of behavior or a means of communication. Where for the Ashkenazic Jews the focus was on an almost other-worldly ascendancy of spiritualism, the Sephardim generally emphasized the literal survival of the people on a very immediate this-world level. This is not by any means to suggest that these Jews operated in a historical vacuum. On the contrary, they too are deeply imbedded in a reading of the historical framework of their community. As with the Ashkenazic Jews, this framework is meant to suggest the future as well as the past.

Maimonides, for example, although he wrote for his time and his place, offered "patterns of response" that cannot even then have failed to have overtones for the future. Acknowledging that conversion is wrong but under certain circumstances necessary, Maimonides advocates that the individual "be the Jew in private" and whenever possible "leave these places and go to where he can practice religion and fulfill the Law without compulsion or fear." This argument does not necessarily have to advance the cause of Zionism, merely the fight for religious tolerance and religious action. Firmly denying the hopes of messianism, Maimonides further rejects the principle of martyrdom. His words, then, are of a continuous struggle; the present is thus bound to the past, for the politics of survival are dependent upon an as yet unchanged dimension of human behavior.

Radically different for that age, however, was an understanding of the causes of persecution held by many in the Sephardic community. As detailed by Solomon Ibn Verga, of the seven held causes for persecution five were the outgrowth of Jewish sin and evil actions. This is not entirely different from the past but that in this case the sins were specifically identified and practical in nature. No longer were Jews largely passive victims, beating their breasts and offering retribution for "the sins of old." At the same time, however, there was a challenge to God: "[A]ll that You have brought upon me or will bring upon me shall be of no avail!" Essential here is the primacy of the individual, one responsible both for the hardships and the virtues of his life. The framework of God and history is clearly manifest, but martyrdom is not an issue as it was for the Ashkenazic community. Rather, Sephardic Jews often chose false conversion as their means to survival. Through life, they made contact with themselves; through religion, they made contact with their God.

Excellent!

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