

The Enduring Legend of the Jewish Pope

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... I tremble for that artless boy, whom flattery or
fraud,
May lead to offer sacrifice to the oppressor's God!
I tremble for the innocent, whose reason scarce
awake,
May the wily tempter's words, for those of truth
mistake
Oh! Rather let him perish, like the martyrs of the
past,
Than incense on the altar of idolatry to cast...¹

THE LEGEND OF THE JEWISH POPE WAS A popular medieval Jewish tale. In it, the young son of a noted rabbi is kidnapped, forcibly baptized, and enrolled in a seminary to study for the priesthood. The boy, a brilliant student, quickly ascends in the Church hierarchy, eventually being elected Pope. Remembering (or discovering) his origins, the Pontiff has an emotional reunion with his aged father, who is both elated that his son is alive, and aghast to learn what has become of him. The Pope asks his father for a penance by which he may atone for his apostasy, and the rabbi hints at martyrdom. Following the meeting, the Pope publicly proclaims his faith in the God of his ancestors, and thereupon commits suicide. In a later version, the Pope disappears mysteriously from the Vatican and returns home, where he resumes his place as the rabbi's long-lost son.

Surprisingly, this tale has remained popular, and has been retold well into the twentieth century, even appearing in modern Jewish children's storybooks. A close examination of the legend reveals that it incorporates motifs familiar to Jews under Christian rule in Europe. The feeling of powerlessness to oppose a hostile Church was reinforced for centuries by repeated acts of anti-Semitic oppression that were sanctioned or tolerated by the Church; kidnappings, forced conversions, and martyrdom were realities of Jewish life in Europe for generations. Drawing on the long experience as an oppressed minority, beginning with their Biblical sojourn in Egypt, the Jews created a legend that the enemy's greatest leader was actually a former Jew who might be convinced to return to the fold. This defiant story expresses the confidence of medieval Jewry both in the ul-

1. From "Tribute of Condolence" (1858), by Penina Moïse, in Bertram W[allace] Korn, *The American Reaction to the Mortara Case: 1958-1959* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1957), p. 163.

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itimate truth of Judaism and in the Jews' potential for success in the Gentile world but for their loyalty to their own faith.

The Jewish Pope legend may have some historical basis, but it is elaborated upon considerably, with motifs drawn from the rich Jewish tradition and from the realities of European Jewish life. The legend was kept alive and popular for many centuries by its continued relevance to the Jews' difficult lives, and gradually assumed a structure similar in some respects to the folktales of their European neighbors. Like many other European folktales, the legend, in its most optimistic version, has today become a children's story.

I

The legend of the Jewish Pope survives in at least four versions, three of which are preserved in Hebrew manuscripts. Avraham David has compared the details of the three manuscript versions and the later Yiddish one.² One manuscript contains an Ashkenazic version of the legend, in which the kidnapped child is identified as Elhanan, son of R. Shim'on the Great of Mayence, a liturgical poet born c.950. In two Sephardic manuscripts, the boy is the son of R. Shlomo ibn Aderet of Barcelona, known as the Rashba (c. 1235-1310). The Ashkenazic manuscript and one of the Sephardic ones relate a condensed version of the story, consisting only of the essential details, while the second Sephardic version relates a longer, more elaborate version.

A longer Ashkenazic version of the legend, in Yiddish, also survives; it is, in fact, the best-known version of the story today, and has often been retold. This version was first published in the *Mayse-Bukh*, or *Book of Tales*, a collection of Talmudic and later Jewish stories originally printed sometime between 1580 and 1602.³ The publication of this book has been called "a great literary event, one of the major milestones in Old-Yiddish literature."⁴ It was reprinted and circulated in Europe for centuries, influencing both the content and the style of later works, and the longevity of our legend is probably due to the importance of the *Mayse-Bukh* for both the oral and written literature of northern European Jewry. Although the book was clearly edited from existing source material, many of the stories were augmented with motifs borrowed from European folklore, or transcribed from an oral tradition.⁵ In comparison to earlier Jewish versions of the material, many stories in the *Mayse-Bukh* have "grad-

2. Avraham David, "Beirurim be-Inyanah Shel Aggadot ha-Afifyor ha-Yehudi," *Yad le-Heiman* (Lod: Habermann Institute, 1983), pp. 19-25.

3. H.G. Enelow, "Andreas," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901), 1: 579; Israel Zinberg, *Old-Yiddish Literature from its Origins to the Haskalah Period*, vol. 7 of *A History of Jewish Literature*, trans. and ed. Bernard Martin (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press; New York: KTAV, 1975), pp. 185-6.

4. Zinberg, p. 197.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

ually changed and grow[n] through the addition of new details;"⁶ such is certainly the case with the book's version of the Jewish Pope legend.

A comparison of the four versions of the Jewish Pope legend will demonstrate the adaptation of the story, not only to different locations and characters, but to the different circumstances of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish life.

1. *Short Ashkenazic Version (SAV)*⁷

In the short Ashkenazic version, the legend is tantalizingly simple. The bare facts of the story are tersely presented in a Hebrew peppered with Biblical phrases, especially those reminiscent of the story of Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 37-47). In only ten words, this version describes Elhanan's kidnapping, religious training, and eventual rise to the papacy. There is an interesting emphasis in this version on noble ancestry. R. Shim'on is described as a descendant of King David, and his wife as a member of "one of the finest families in the land." When the Pope asks his attendant priests why none of the rulers who seek his advice claim to be related to him, he seems to be asking by what lineage he is entitled to his position. The priests answer truthfully that he is "the son of one of the greatest men among the Jews;" however, they do not really acknowledge the greatness of his Jewish lineage, and, therefore, they feel compelled to add that "it is God who has decreed all this greatness for you." The legend's Jewish audience is expected, of course, to infer that the boy's noble Jewish lineage is actually responsible for his rise to office, an indication of the superiority of Jewish nobility to that of their Christian neighbors.

Upon discovering that he is the son of R. Shim'on, the Pope sends for his father and reveals his identity to him. Confessing his disbelief in Christianity, Elhanan asks his father for a penance by which he may atone for his misdeeds. R. Shim'on responds, "You have profaned the Name of the Holy and Blessed One in public, so now hallow His Name in public" — referring to *Kiddush ha-Shem*, literally "the sanctification of God's Name," the classical Hebrew term for martyrdom. Following his father's advice, the Pope assembles the nobles of the Church at a great public gathering, where he proclaims his Jewish faith and then flings himself from atop the tower on which he is standing. Upon hearing the news, R. Shim'on composes the prayer "*Melekh amon*," which is still recited in the *Shaharit* (morning) service on the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah. An acrostic in this poem includes the words "Elhanan my son, may he live et-

6. Ibid.

7. From Cambridge Ms. Add. 858, pp. 46a-47a. Published by S.Z.H. Halberstamm, "*Ma'aseh shel Rabbi Shim'on ha-Gadol*," *Ginzei Nistarot* 3 (1872): 1-4; Aharon [Adolf] Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash* (Berlin, 1853-1877), vol. 6, pp. 137-139; and Micha Joseph Bin-Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales*, ed. Emanuel Bin-Gorion, trans. I.M. Lask (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 414-416.

ernal life [*hayyei olam*]. Amen.”⁸ Recalling this acrostic, the legend refers to the boy’s desire to earn a place in the World to Come (*olam ha-ba*).⁹

R. Shim’om’s promise that Elhanan will enter the World to Come echoes two Talmudic stories about non-Jews who earn their share in that World by a single pious action. In both instances, the action is followed by suicide — in one by jumping into a pyre, and in the other by jumping from atop a tall building.¹⁰ In each case, a rabbi had promised the suicidal character that his act of piety (in the latter case, the jump itself, for the death of this Roman leader annulled an anti-Semitic decree) would earn him entrance into the World to Come.

2. Short Sephardic Version (SSV)¹¹

The short Sephardic version of the legend offers little more detail than the Ashkenazic source. The text begins with a record of the oral transmission of the story. It is explained that “a great Spanish dignitary” liked the Rashba’s son, arranged for his kidnapping, and enrolled him in a seminary. Eventually, the boy arrived in Rome, and “was made a dignitary (*sar*) with great honor;” this may be understood to mean the Pope, although the text is not explicit on this point. The Rashba goes to Rome to discuss community concerns with this dignitary, but nearly faints in his presence. Upon questioning by the dignitary, the Rashba reveals the story of his lost son. The Pope, who has long known himself to be of Jewish birth, is excited, and asks the Rashba whether the boy had any distinguishing marks. His father describes these, and the Pope removes his vestments to reveal identical marks on his own body. In contrast to the Ashkenazic version, no explicit mention is made here of the boy’s regret or penitence. Instead, he is hesitant; he simply asks his father what “remedy” may be found for his “affliction.” The Rashba answers cryptically that “the remedy for water [baptism] is [death by] fire.” This is reminiscent of the fate under the Inquisition of *conversos* (Spanish, forced converts to Catholicism) who were found to have been insincere in their conversions.

A few days later, the Pope repents, and decides to undergo all four

8. Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor la-Yamim ha-Nora'im* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981), p. 47; my translation.

9. The text actually seems to understand the first line of one stanza of the poem, which reads “*Elhanan nahalato be-no'am le-hashper*,” as the reference to Elhanan, although the actual acrostic, and not that line, is echoed in the boy’s desire to enter *olam ha-ba* (“*Mah e'zeh ve'ehyeh ben olam ha-ba?*”). This discrepancy may indicate that our text is descended from an earlier version in which the actual acrostic (“*Elhanan b'ni yehi le-hayyei olam. Amen.*”) was quoted and juxtaposed to the boy’s question about entering *olam ha-ba*. The possibility of the existence of an earlier version, which may have originated in another location, is also supported by the mention in our text of “a certain city called Mayence,” as if the reader is not expected to be familiar with the place.

10. *Avodah Zarah* 18a; *Ta'anit* 29a.

11. From Moscow Ms. Ginzburg Collection 652, pp. 108b-109a. Published by Avraham David, “*Beirurim*,” p. 23.

capital punishments of the rabbinical court. This detail, not found in the Ashkenazic versions, is reminiscent of the attempt to re-establish a properly ordained rabbinical court in the sixteenth century in order to assign penance to returning *conversos*.¹² The Pope assembles the people at a public sermon and begins to speak, but suddenly places a noose around his neck and flings himself onto an upturned sword in the midst of a bonfire. The Pope's startled followers preserve his ashes in a bronze urn, calling them the "Ashes of the Heretic." The author of this version, R. Gedalya ibn Yahya, adds that he has personally seen this urn in Rome, echoing Talmudic statements about vessels of the Temple.¹³

3. Long Sephardic Version (LSV)¹⁴

In the expanded Sephardic version of the story, each detail is elaborated upon. The son of the Rashba, the text explains, passes by a certain church every day on his way to the house of study. The local priest, watching him, takes a liking to the boy and kidnaps him, enrolling him in *beit midresheiheim*, "their seminary." There, the boy distinguishes himself, and is eventually elected Pope. Curious as to his origin, he makes inquiries, and is told that his family was killed in a feud, but this explanation does not satisfy him.

Sometime later, the Jewish community of Barcelona must send envoys to the Pope to plead for mercy. Divine intervention causes the Rashba, the Pope's father, to be chosen by lot. When the Rashba appears before the Pope, the latter's appearance reminds the rabbi of his kid-

12. Through the Talmudic period (until c. 500 CE), *semikhah*, or ordination of rabbis, was thought to maintain an unbroken chain from God's ordination of Moses on Mount Sinai. Sometime after the redaction of the Talmud, the chain of Divine *semikhah* was broken, and replaced by human ordination. One opinion indicated, however, that a rabbi who obtained the approval of all of the sages of Palestine must be considered to have recovered the lost Divine approbation once transmitted through *semikhah* (Moses Maimonides, *Yad ha-Hazakah*, *Sanhedrin* 4:11). In 1538, an attempt was made to put this ruling into practice. One motivation for this move was the desire to establish a rabbinical court of ordained judges. Such a court would be empowered to impose flagellation or other penance on Jews who were compelled to convert to Christianity during persecutions in Spain but later wished to return to Judaism. The court might subsequently grant absolution to these penitents. See Isaac Levitats and Aaron Rothkopf, "Semikhah," *Encyclopedia Judaica* [1971], vol. 14, cols. 1140-1447. See also, Jacob Katz, "The Dispute between Jacob Berab and Levi ben Habib over Renewing Ordination," *BINAH*, Vol. I, *Studies in Jewish History*, Joseph Dan, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1989), pp.1.7.1-1.7.23. Among the audience of the Jewish Pope legend were Jews who were likely to be quite familiar with the circumstances surrounding forced conversion; at least in the case of the Sephardic versions, the audience probably knew of penitent former apostates as well.

13. *Yoma* 57a, *Sukkah* 5a.

14. From Warsaw Ms. 281, pp. 49a-b, and Oxford Ms. Bodleian Opp. Add. 4° 181, pp. 256-7. Published by Moritz Steinschneider, "Zum Judenpapst," *Israelitische Letterbode* 7 (1881-2): 170-74; Menahem Mendl Gerlitz, ed., *Mavo le-Sifrei ha-Rashba* (Jerusalem, 1986), vol. 1, pp. 189-192.

napped son, and he weeps. The Pope demands an explanation, and the Rashba eventually explains the truth. Curious, the Pope asks the Rashba to return later; he summons his *komer omen* (translated by Shefer-Vanson as "personal priest,"¹⁵ but carrying connotations of adoptive parent and teacher) and demands that he finally be told the truth regarding his origin. He is told that he is a Jew, and also learns some details of his ancestry and of the kidnapping which brought him into the church.

When the Rashba returns to the Pope, the Pontiff asks the rabbi some questions in order to confirm his suspicion that he is the Rashba's son. When his curiosity is satisfied, he informs his father of his identity and then, overcome with emotion, flings himself at his father's feet. After the shock of recognition has passed, the Pope asks his father whether Judaism or Christianity is the true faith. The father answers that Judaism is true, and offers both scriptural prooftexts and theological arguments which support his contention. The Pope, who "[is] wise and underst[ands] all forms of wisdom . . . immediately realize[s] the truth."

The Pope asks his father what penance he may perform in order to save his soul. The father responds, "My son, . . . until now you have fulfilled and exalted their faith publicly; henceforth you will have to do the opposite. . . ." After the Rashba has returned home, the Pope calls a public assembly at which he delivers a sermon against the faith. He concludes: "[B]ecause I strengthened your religion in the past, I condemn myself to death by burning," and flings himself into the bonfire prepared nearby. Thinking him insane, the Christians call him the "Heretic Pope," a name retained "even today."

4. Long Ashkenazic Version (LAV)¹⁶

The long Ashkenazic version differs in several ways from the others. One Sabbath, a Gentile woman, who lights the fire in the rabbi's home each week, kidnaps Elhanan while his parents are away at prayers, and baptizes the boy. A Jewish maidservant witnesses the kidnapping, but thinks that the woman is only taking the child out to play. When she realizes her error, she flees in shame, but later returns to tell the rabbi and his wife what has happened. R. Shim'on's usual clairvoyance fails him; he fasts and prays that they boy's location be revealed to him, but his prayers are not answered. (R. Shim'on the Great is earlier described as having in his home three mirrors in which he can see the past and the future, but these are not mentioned again in connection with his inability to locate

15. Avraham David, "Notes on the Legend of the Jewish Pope," trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, *Immanuel* 15 (Winter 1982-3): 96.

16. Originally Yiddish, from *Mayse-bukh* (cf. Enelow, and Jellinek, vol 5, pp. xxxviii, 207). Translated from Yiddish to English by Moses Gaster, in *Ma'aseh Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1934, reissued 1981); Hebrew translation published by Jellinek, vol. 5, pp. 148-152.

Elhanan; the reference to the mirrors may be a vestige of an earlier version in which R. Shim'on explicitly consults them in his search.)

Like his father, the boy is a great scholar, rising from one seminary to another until he arrives in Rome and is named a cardinal. Upon the death of the incumbent Pope, Elhanan is chosen as his successor. The new Pope remembers his identity, and resolves to return to his original faith. He strongly desires to see his father again, and decides to lure him to Rome through a ruse. Issuing a decree against the Jews of Mayence, he expects his father to be chosen as the Jewish emissary to plead before the Pope on their behalf.

R. Shim'on and two other delegates are, indeed, chosen to journey to Rome on behalf of their brethren. The Roman Jews, who are surprised to learn of the papal decree, help the delegates arrange an audience with the Pope, who orders that the leader of the delegation alone come before him. He listens to R. Shim'on's plea, but maintains that he has heard many evil things about the Jews of Mayence. The Pope then engages his father in disputation, astonishing the rabbi with his brilliance and vast knowledge. The audience of the legend understood, of course, that the Pontiff's intelligence came from his Jewish ancestry. The Pope, who has very much enjoyed the discussion, assures R. Shim'on that the Jews did well to place their hopes in him.

Then the Pope invites R. Shim'on to play chess with him. Although the rabbi is a master chess player, the Pope defeats him. The two men engage in further disputation, in which R. Shim'on learns great insights from the Pope. Finally, R. Shim'on tearfully repeats his plea on behalf of the Jews of Mayence. The Pope sends away all his attendants, and reveals that he is the rabbi's son. He confesses his ruse and, expressing his desire to repent, asks his father whether he may still do so. R. Shim'on assures him that all sincere penitents are accepted. This tolerance on the part of R. Shim'on reflects a conscious rejection by the LAV author of the harsh demand of personal self-sacrifice present in the earlier versions of the legend. The Pope tells his father to return to Mayence, adding that he will follow after leaving a legacy that will benefit the Jews.

R. Shim'on return to Mayence with a papal document revoking the anti-Semitic decree. In Rome, the Pope composes a book of heresy against the faith, and leaves instructions that all successive Popes must read it. Then he flees in secret, and returns to Mayence and to Judaism. In commemoration of Elhanan's joyous return, R. Shim'on composes a prayer for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah in which he alludes to Elhanan's name. In anticipation of skepticism and disbelief, the author of the LAV points to this poem as proof of his story.

The text of this version also includes an alternative recognition scene in which R. Shim'on recognizes his son by the chess moves which he had taught him when Elhanan was still a boy. Like Elhanan's rise to power,

this is another expression of the medieval Jews' belief in Jewish intellectual superiority.

Evolution of the Legend

These four versions of the legend appear to have evolved in the order in which they are described above. The simplicity and concise presentation of the story in the short Ashkenazic and short Sephardic versions suggest some relationship between these two texts and, also, their earlier origin. Avraham David has written that the SAV predates both surviving Sephardic versions,¹⁷ in part because of the mention of R. Shim'on, who preceded the Rashba by three centuries. The LAV is distinguished by the introduction of completely new elements, as well as by its Yiddish-language primary source.

II

An examination of the legend of the Jewish Pope, according to the structuralist theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss, reveals some interesting insights into its inherent meaning. Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of folk literature, as tales of mediation between binary oppositions, reveals their deep structure. Most interesting in such an analysis of our legend, however, is the story's failure to conform exactly to the form described by Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss sees in human thinking an attempt to reconcile the paradoxes, or binary oppositions, inherent in life. These include the oppositions between nature and culture, between good and evil, between life and death, and between the predicted and the observed.¹⁸ In his view, any mythic narrative is structured around one main binary opposition, which may be presented through metaphor: for example, the opposition of nature and culture, which may seem irreconcilable. The same dyad, however, will be further represented in transformations — such as the opposition of raw to cooked foods, or sweet to sour tastes — and these oppositions may then be successfully mediated by a character or an event in the narrative.¹⁹ Although Lévi-Strauss focuses his attention on the application of this theory to myth, it may be used in connection with other forms of narrative as well; Lévi-Strauss himself applies his methodology to the Tsimshian folktale of Asdiwal.²⁰

The main binary opposition in the legend of the Jewish Pope is that between Judaism and Christianity. The figure of the young Pope might

17. David, "Beirurim," p. 23.

18. Edmund Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (New York: Viking, 1970), pp. 15-32.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-73.

20. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Story of Asdiwal," in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Monique Layton (New York: Basic, 1963), vol. 2, pp. 146-197; rpt. in *Sacred Narrative*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1984), pp. 295-314.

seem to imply an attempt at mediation, within one individual, of these two opposing faiths, yet the legend actually denies the possibility of any mediation between these opposed systems. The boy and his father, in fact, embody the main opposition, the boy as leader of the Church and his father as a spokesman for Judaism. The legend here expresses the impossibility of compromise in matters of faith; in Lévi-Straussian terms, no possibility exists for mediation of the main binary opposition.

Ultimately, the Pope must confront the opposition between life and death. Here, too, there seems to be no mediation possible. This opposition is actually a transformation (restatement) of the first, for medieval European Jews were often required to choose between conversion to Christianity, rewarded with life in this world, or martyrdom as Jews, followed, they believed, by eternal life in the World to Come. A Hebrew chronicle of the first Crusade in 1096 demonstrates clearly the opposition which medieval Jews saw between this world and the World to Come. The text describes the victims of the Crusade as happy to sanctify God's Name through martyrdom, and thus to enter the World to Come, exchanging "a world of darkness . . . for a world of light, a world of sorrow for one of joy, a transitory world for an eternal world."²¹

The various texts that we have examined above restate the opposition of Judaism and Christianity in several ways. In the SAV, R. Shim'on's advice to his son is expressed as "You have profaned the Name of the Holy and Blessed One in public, so now hallow His Name in public,"²² setting up an opposition between *hillul ha-Shem*, "desecration of the Name" and *kiddush ha-Shem*, "sanctification of the Name" (i.e., martyrdom). In the SSV, the Rashba tells his son that "[t]he remedy for water is fire,"²³ expressing the religious conflict through yet another transformation.

The SSV further hints at an opposition between the rabbi — the boy's natural father — and the "great Spanish Dignitary," or priest, who loves the kidnapped boy, and enrolls him in "their seminary," treating the boy like a son. This opposition is more elaborately expressed in the LSV, in which the boy is raised and educated by his *komer omen*. When finally confronted by the Pope, his *komer omen* reveals the young man's Jewish origin, and is promptly jailed or killed by the Pope. This purely pragmatic action ends the psychologically awkward situation in which the Pope has both a "good father" — the Rashba — and a "bad father" — his *komer omen*. The elimination of this transformed opposition is not a true resolution; however, even the tragic death of the Pope does not actually resolve the conflict between the faiths.

The LAV also employs contrasting pairs in its expression of the opposition inherent in the Judeo-Christian conflict. Interestingly, there is

21. Shlomo Eidelberg, trans. and ed., *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of The First and Second Crusades* (Madison, WI: U. of Wisconsin Press, 1977), p. 31.

22. Bin-Gorion, vol. 1, p. 415.

23. David, "Notes," p. 96.

no mention of an adopting priest, or of any individual priest at all. In this version, the Christian woman who kidnaps the child and offers him to the Church is contrasted with the Jewish maidservant employed by the rabbi and his wife, who witnesses the crime and reports it to the boy's parents.

Also in the LAV, the chess game seems to mediate between the faiths, as the Pope tells R. Shim'on that he plays chess with Jews daily, and invites his father to join him in a game. In an impartial game, it must have been hoped, Christian and Jew might perhaps compete against one another as equals. Yet, to the medieval Jewish audience, which knew his true identity, the Pope's victory over his father — like the amazing intellect demonstrated by the Pope in his discussions with the rabbi — merely reinforced a message of Jewish superiority.

It is apparent, then, that our legend is based on the fundamental binary opposition between Judaism and Christianity, which was central to the world view of medieval Jews. An examination of the historical context of the legend, and of the source of several of its motifs, will demonstrate the centrality of this dyad in the lives and thought of medieval European Jewry.

III

The legend of the Jewish Pope was initially thought to be based on the papal schism of 1130.²⁴ In that year, Pietro Leonis, a cardinal from the influential Pierleoni family, was elected Pope by a majority of the College of Cardinals and took the name Anacletus II. Pietro's great-grandfather, Benedictus Christianus, was born a Jew, Barukh, and had served as financier in several papal courts even before his conversion to Catholicism. A minority of the cardinals, objecting to Anacletus's Jewish ancestry, denounced him as "antipope" and elected another cardinal in his stead. The schism was resolved in 1138 when Anacletus's successor, appointed by Anacletus's supporters after his death (and similarly labeled an "antipope" by his opponents), abdicated his office.²⁵

Others have speculated that the story, at least in its apparently earlier Ashkenazic version, is based on actual events in the life of R. Shim'on the Great of Mayence. Citing the existence of several independent traditions regarding the conversion of R. Shim'on's son, Elhanan, Avraham Grossman suggests that the boy may have been forcibly converted during the persecutions of 1008-1012.²⁶ The son of Rabbenu Gershon, a distinguished con-

24. See Zinberg, vol. 1, p. 193; Enelow 1: 580; Hermann Vogelstein and Paul Rieger, *History of the Jews in Rome* [1895-1986], trans. and ed. Moses Hadas (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1940), pp. 145-147; and Hymie Klugman, "Elchanan, the Jewish Pope," *Midstream* 34 (1988): 26-27.

25. M. Hirsh Goldberg, *The Jewish Connection* [1976] (New York: Bantam, 1977), pp. 116-18. Also see Joachim Prinz, *Popes From the Ghetto: A View of Medieval Christendom* (New York: Horizon, 1966).

26. Avraham Grossman, *Hakhmei Ashkenaz ha-Rishonim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981), pp. 89-90.

temporary of R. Shim'on, is known to have been converted at this time.²⁷ R. Gershom is mentioned briefly in the SAV as R. Shim'on's colleague, perhaps to imply a connection between the fates of the rabbis' sons. R. Shim'on is also known to have interceded with the Christian authorities on behalf of his fellow Jews. Avraham David implies that the Ashkenazic version of the legend was attached to R. Shim'on for these reasons.²⁸

Below we shall examine some motifs which appear in the legend, and the historical realities on which these motifs are based. The frequent forced conversions, martyrdom, and interreligious disputations, as well as the distinctive Jewish dress of the period, contributed to a polarization of the contemporary Jewish world view into an opposition between Christianity and Judaism. The Jewish insistence on the impossibility of compromise intensified in the face of the Christian belief that one might, indeed, change one's religious affiliation. Jewish authorities saw no possibility of mediation between the faiths, nor did they recognize the conversions of Jews to Christianity. This categorical dichotomy is reflected in both the legal and the literary texts of the time.

All three surviving manuscript versions of the legend — the SAV, SSV and LSV — indicate that the Pope's father recognized his son by his distinguishing birthmarks. It is interesting to consider this device in light of the frequent demarcation of medieval European Jews from Gentiles in their mode of dress. Jews were first distinguished from the non-Jewish world with respect to their clothing by Biblical precepts and rabbinic guidelines. In medieval Europe, "[t]hese communal directives were reinforced by numerous Dress Regulations issued by the Church or by the civil authorities . . ." ²⁹ Native European Jewish costumes included the Persian caftan and girdle, as well as a characteristic Jewish hat (*Judenhut*), also said to be of Persian origin.³⁰ Distinctive medieval European Jewish dress, as prescribed by law, variously included caps, gowns, red or yellow badges, and cowls.³¹ These ubiquitous external signs of Jewish exclusion from Gentile society are reflected in the legend by the physical signs or birthmarks on the Jewish Pope himself.

The kidnapping and conversion of the boy constitute the premise for the legend of the Jewish Pope. The Pope's suicide (the conclusion of the earlier versions) is described as *Kiddush ha-Shem*, a concept all too familiar to medieval Jews. The Jewish Pope legend, as we have said, thus reflects the historical realities of Jewish life in medieval Europe. The kidnapping and forced conversion of Jews, especially children, was not uncommon.³²

27. A. M. Habermann, *Gezerot Ashkenaz ve-Zorfat* (Jerusalem: Tarshish, 1945), p. 16.

28. David, "Beirurim," p. 22.

29. Alfred Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1967), p. 94.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

32. A dramatic episode in the nineteenth century demonstrated that Jews were still subject

Many former Jews did become priests or even higher dignitaries of the Church, and often participated in attacks on those faithful Jews remaining under their jurisdiction.³³ Expulsion and massacres occurred frequently; martyrdom, *Kiddush ha-Shem*, was preferred by Jews over submission to the enemy and conversion to Christianity.

Jacob Katz discusses at length the phenomena of apostasy and martyrdom in his examination of Jewish-Christian relations during medieval times,³⁴ and emphasizes the extent to which the legal implications of apostasy are discussed in medieval rabbinic literature. By elucidation of the Talmudic principle that "a Jew, even if he sins, remains a Jew," the rabbis ascribed to Jewish apostates to Christianity continuing membership in the Jewish nation,³⁵ and hoped for the eventual return of such individuals. The legend thus supported the belief that such a return was, indeed, possible.³⁶

Although martyrdom was known in earlier Jewish communities as well, Katz observes that "the Ashkenazic Middle Ages outshine all other periods of Jewish history as an epoch of heroic steadfastness."³⁷ Through their deaths, the martyrs expressed both their repudiation of Christianity and their affirmation of Judaism as the true faith.³⁸ The Jews hoped that their oppressors would

comprehend, understand, and take to heart, that in folly have they cast our bodies to the ground, and for falsehood have they slain our saints, . . . and

to the whim of the Church. In June of 1858, seven-year-old Edgardo Mortara was removed from his parents' home in Bologna, Italy, and taken to Rome. The Church later explained that the Mortaras' Christian maid had secretly baptized the boy when he was ill several years earlier; a baptism performed on a child thought to be suffering from a fatal illness, even if performed without the parents' permission, was considered valid by the Church, so young Edgardo, now healthy again, had to be raised as a Christian (Korn, pp. 3-6). Despite worldwide protests, Church officials, including Pope Pius IX, refused the demands of the Mortara parents that their son be returned. Upon the introduction of secular law to Rome in 1870, Edgardo's parents attempted to bring their son home, but Edgardo, by then called Pius Mary Mortara, and studying for the priesthood, refused to join them (Ibid., p. 159). It is interesting that legends of Edgardo's continuing faithfulness to some Jewish traditions developed even within his own lifetime, though he denied them (Ibid., p. 160). The Mortara episode, far from unique in European Jewish history, graphically demonstrates the continuing discrimination because of which the Jewish Pope legend remained relevant to European Jewry for centuries.

33. H[ayyim] H[illel] Ben-Sasson, "Disputations and Polemics," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), vol. 6, cols. 79-103.

34. Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1961), pp. 67-92.

35. Ibid.; cf. *Teshuvot Rashi*, 173 and 175.

36. Not only was the fate of Jewish converts to Christianity debated by the rabbis, but the requirements for the acceptance of converts to Judaism were defined as well. In Katz's view, the Jewish "hope to win converts from other faiths" — and occasional actions designed to encourage this — are the best "proof for the fact that medieval Jewry was convinced of Judaism's truth, its superiority, and its religious mission" (Katz, p. 81).

37. Katz, p. 85.

38. Ibid., p. 91.

that they do not know their Creator, nor walk on a virtuous path or an upright way,

according to the Hebrew chronicle of the first Crusade quoted above.³⁹

Another fixture of medieval Jewish-Christian relations was the disputation, a debate between representatives of the two faiths, each attempting to prove the superiority of his religion.⁴⁰ These debates were sometimes conducted in public, at the insistence of the Christian authorities; in the event of a Christian victory (sometimes predetermined), physical attacks on the Jews often followed. Considerable polemical literature appeared on both sides to prepare potential disputants for the challenges that they were likely to receive.⁴¹

The discussion between the Pope and his father regarding religious matters, as described in some detail in the longer versions of the legend, is only partially reminiscent of the disputations held in the Middle Ages. The second discussion between R. Shim'on and the Pope in the LAV is an intellectually exciting exchange in which each party learns from the other and enjoys the experience; additionally, neither party to this discussion presents any hostile arguments in support of his own faith. The account seems to be an idealized creation of this version's later author. In fact, as Katz observes, disputations were largely hostile, and called for Jewish apologists to explain away Talmudic quotations which were disparaging to Gentiles.⁴² In this respect, the first disputation in the LAV is more realistic. Yet, this discussion, too, is presented by the author as a conversation rather than a dispute. The Pope, who had already resolved to return to Judaism before summoning his father to Rome, shares insights with the latter, although he has not yet revealed his identity to him. In no version of the legend does the Pope offer arguments in support of the Catholic position, even when his father does argue for Judaism, as in the LSV. Thus, the legend preserves the form of a disputation, but neither the content nor the hostility which marked true confrontations between representatives of the faiths.

The frequent disputations between representatives of Judaism and Catholicism in the Middle Ages spurred the imagination of some Jews. The idea that the Pope himself might be convinced, through disputation, to convert to Judaism had several adherents among the Jewish messianists of the time, who hoped that the "return" of the Pope to his faith's mother religion would prompt all Catholics to follow suit and lead, eventually, to divine redemption.

The thirteenth-century Jewish mystic, Avraham Abulafia, an adher-

39. Eidelberg, p. 48.

40. See Katz, pp. 106-113; David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), pp. 3-37; Ben-Sasson, vol. 6, cols. 87-94.

41. Ben-Sasson, vol. 6, col. 89.

42. Katz, p. 109.

ent of this position, attempted to meet with Pope Nicholas III in 1280. By examination of Abulafia's speeches and writings of just before this time, Moshe Idel has shown that Abulafia believed himself to be the Messiah.⁴³ Idel writes that Abulafia believed himself obligated to confront the Pope in Rome on the eve of Rosh-Ha-Shanah of that year, a year in which both Jews and Christians anticipated some messianic event of great significance. Abulafia felt such pressure to achieve the meeting on time that he was willing to abandon Rome for the Pope's castle in Soriano, in violation both of his prophecy and of the Pope's declaration that any attempt by Abulafia to gain an audience with him would result in the Jew's execution. Abulafia arrived in Soriano the day after the Pontiff's sudden death on 22 August 1280; he was thus forced to abandon his attempt to convert the Catholic leader to Judaism, which Idel shows to have been Abulafia's intention.⁴⁴

In the LSV, the Pope's father presents arguments to his son in support of the validity of Judaism. In light of the contemporary idea that even the Pope might be converted if an appropriate presentation of Judaism were made to him, the legend may be interpreted as a reassurance that the logic of Judaism would convince the fair and impartial listener.

Thus, the medieval Jewish world view reflected the polarization of European society into Jews and Gentiles, with no possibility of mediation or compromise between the two groups. The motif of the conversion of the Pope demonstrates dramatically the emphatic nature of Jewish faith in the ultimate truth of Judaism. The Judeo-Christian opposition, reinforced by repeated incidents of forced conversion, disputation, and instances of martyrdom, had considerable influence on the evolution of the Jewish Pope legend.

IV

Motifs appearing in the legend are borrowed from many sources. Biblical motifs are especially relevant to the story of the innocent, kidnapped child, and earlier Jewish stories about the Church are also employed. In addition, the legend shares some motifs with a Christian legend of a woman Pope.

Biblical Motifs

The Jews naturally couched the Jewish Pope legend in familiar Biblical motifs, some of them drawn from stories which closely parallel the Jewish Pope legend. The narrative of Joseph's rise to power as Vizier of Egypt is one such example. While still a young man, Joseph is taken from the land of the Hebrews against his will. His rise to power brings him a

43. Moshe Idel, "Avraham Abulafia ve'ha-Afifyor: Mashma'uto ve-Gilgulav shel Nisayon she-Nikhshal," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 7-8 (1982-83), (Heb. sect.): 5-6.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

new identity, so that when his brothers come before him to beg for food, they believe they are bowing to an Egyptian prince rather than to their own sibling. Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, saving his family from death by starvation.

Words borrowed from the Joseph narrative are used in three versions of the Jewish Pope legend, suggesting a connection among the stories. The boy in the story is kidnapped — *nignav* (SAV), or *u-genavo* “and he kidnapped him” (LSV); Joseph tells the Egyptians that “in truth, I was kidnapped [sic]” *gunov gunavti* (Gen. 40: 15).⁴⁵ Similarly, the Biblical word for Joseph’s striped coat, *kutonet*, is used in the SSV to describe the Pope’s vestments. Y.Y. Trunks’s Yiddish-language retelling of the later Ashkenazic version of the legend (see V below) even calls R. Shim’on’s son Joseph; the author of this account has the distraught rabbi quote Biblical verses about the disappearance of Joseph when he was taken to Egypt.⁴⁶

Similar motifs appear in other Biblical stories. Moses is brought to the Egyptian Pharaoh’s court while still an infant; he, too, rises to power as a prince, but, in order to help his brethren, he abandons his noble position and joins his people in their suffering (Exodus 2 ff.). Daniel, one of the Jewish children captured by order of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia, eventually becomes the chief adviser to the king. Esther becomes Queen of Persia as a young woman; as the favorite of King Ahasuerus, she is able to avert Haman’s evil decree against the Jews.

Common to these stories is the child taken against his (or her) will and forced to join the enemy leadership, wherein (s)he rises to prominence and is able to help his (or her) brethren. The kidnapped or coerced child is a motif which appears several times in the Hebrew Bible; the expression, *tinok shenishbah*, “captured child,” has become the term in rabbinic texts for the category of individuals who were raised among their captors, in ignorance of Jewish law, and who are, therefore, not punished for its infringement.⁴⁷

The traditional Jewish interpretation of these stories of kidnapped children, expressed in the Bible itself, attributes their captivity to Divine Providence, which has ensured that they will later be in a position to help their brethren. Joseph tells his brothers,

Now, do not be depressed or reproach yourselves that you sent me hither; it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you . . . God has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God (Gen. 45: 5-8).

45. After *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985). All subsequent Biblical quotations follow this translation.

46. Y[ehiel] Y[ish'ayah] Trunk, “*Der Yiddisher Poypst*,” in *Kval un Beymer: Historishe Noveln un Eseys* (New York: Farlag Unzer Tsayt, 1958), p. 135.

47. See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 68b.

In the book of Esther, Mordecai alludes to this understanding of God's immanence in history, as he admonishes Esther for her initial reluctance to ask the king to show mercy to her Jewish brethren:

Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis (4: 13-14).

Although this motif is not adopted in its entirety by the legend, the rise of the kidnapped boy to the highest office in his captors' hierarchy of power is reminiscent of these Biblical stories. The legend differs, though, in the conspicuous absence of any significant assistance which the Pope, by virtue of his position, can offer the Jews. Instead, the son-Pope is called upon to sacrifice his life, giving up the power of his office. Only in LAV, with its radically different conclusion, does the Pope aid the Jewish community.

St. Peter Legend

An earlier Jewish legend about St. Peter, an interesting antecedent to the legend of the Jewish Pope, hints at the long history of Jewish suffering at the hands of the Church. The story is preserved in *Sefer Toldot Yeshu*, also called *Tam umu'ad*, a collection of Jewish tales about Jesus and the Apostles.⁴⁸ According to this account, a rabbi named Shim'on is confronted by the early Christians and asked to assume the leadership of the fledgling Church. Although initially unwilling, he is persuaded by his fellow Jews to accept the demand, for the Christians have promised not to harm the Jews if they can convince R. Shim'on to join the Church.

R. Shim'on becomes Pope, and orders the Christians to build a tower in which he might commune with Jesus. Thus isolated from the people, the rabbi secretly continues to observe the precepts of Judaism, while periodically instructing the Christians not to harm the Jews. To pass the time, he composes liturgical poems and surreptitiously dispatches them to the Jewish community. The legend ascribes to R. Shim'on the authorship of "*Nishmat kol hai*," a poem of praise still recited every Sabbath morning. The legend also recounts Jesus's renaming of Shim'on as *Kefa*, or *Cephas* in Greek, meaning "rock;" the name assumed the Latin form *Petrus*, from which Shim'on became known as Peter.

This tale, in which a rabbi is forced to become the first Pope, is a predecessor to the later Jewish Pope legend. It is interesting to note that the name Shim'on is also associated with the Ashkenazic versions of the later Pope legend, in which the kidnapped child's father is identified with R. Shim'on the Great.

Samuel Krauss, an authority on *Toldot Yeshu*, supports the opinion of

48. Published in Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* [1902] (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1977).

D. Oppenheimer that the Peter legend was composed in the sixth or seventh century.⁴⁹ Although later versions of this legend attribute to Peter the composition of many *piyyutim* (liturgical poems), Krauss concludes that the original legend must have mentioned only "Nishmat," as the other poems attributed to Peter were written later than the origin of the legend.⁵⁰ Krauss also cites an interesting parallel legend, preserved in manuscript and published by Oppenheimer, about an apostate Jew who becomes a certain Bishop Andreas. During a time of Christian hatred toward the Jews, this bishop delivers a sermon which placates the Christians and saves his brethren. When the Jews attempt to thank him for his intercession, Andreas asks his brethren to incorporate into their liturgy the prayers which he has composed.⁵¹ This legend may be the basis for Enelew's ascription of the name Andreas to the Jewish Pope in his discussion of the Pope legend (n. 3 above).

We have said that the legend of the Jewish Pope is an expression of Jewish defiance in the face of political subordination to the Church in the Middle Ages. The Jewish reaction to this opposition between religions, as expressed in the legend, was one of complete confidence in the ultimate truth of their faith and in the eventual reward that they could expect for their loyalty. The existence of an earlier legend about Peter, then, demonstrates that this political and physical oppression began quite early in Jewish history and persisted for over a millennium, producing the defiant reactions of pride in Jewish intellectual capacities and steadfastness in faith. The Jews' continued subjugation contributed to the persistence of the legend — both in its original form (concerning Peter) and in a later, modified form — as a response to the continuing need for the reassurances that the story offered its audience.

Pope Joan Legend

Contemporary with the Jewish legend of a Jewish Pope, there was one of Christian origin concerning a woman Pope. It shares with the Jewish story a central character who attains the papacy although belonging to a group not normally eligible for that office. The legend describes a woman, originally either from England or from Mayence, who studies in Athens for a time. In the ninth century she goes to Rome disguised as a man; she gives well-received lectures and soon rises to ecclesiastical office. Eventually, she becomes the Pope, taking (according to some versions) the name John Anglicus.⁵²

The Papess (or Popess, as she is called in later sources), is said to have

49. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-28.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

52. J.J.I. von Döllinger, *Fables Respecting the Popes of the Middle Ages*, trans. Alfred Plummer (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1872), pp. 15-16; C.M. Aherne, "Joan, Popess, Fable of," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967), vol. 7, pp. 991-92.

held office for over two years. Her sex is finally discovered when she gives birth to a child on a side street in Rome during an official procession; she either dies in childbirth and is buried there, or is immediately removed from office. According to the legend, Pope Joan is commemorated by a statue and an inscription on the small street where she gave birth. In addition, subsequent papal processions refrained from taking that street, although it was more direct than alternate routes.⁵³

This story was written about 1250, and repeated and believed from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries.⁵⁴ A statue of Joan was even included among those of the Popes in the cathedral of Siena around 1400.⁵⁵ She was usually said to have succeeded Leo IV (d. 855), who, Döllinger notes, was the only Pope in several centuries to have been elected by virtue of intellectual distinction.⁵⁶

As in the case of the Jewish Pope legend, the story of a woman Pope attached itself to — or, perhaps, was inspired by — several familiar objects. A statue of an adult in flowing robes, accompanied by a child, once stood on a small street in Rome, near what could have been a tombstone. That same street, probably because of its narrow width, was avoided by official processions (and later demolished). In addition, newly-elected Popes sat at their initiations on a pierced, hollow stone chair. The legend explains that this enabled Church officials to verify the sex of the new Pontiff. The missal was said to have been shortened considerably by the removal of the hymns composed by Joan after her identity was discovered.⁵⁷ This reference to liturgical composition is intriguingly reminiscent of the Jewish Pope legend; of course, unlike the Christians, the Jews were proud to retain prayers composed by a Pope who was secretly faithful to his Jewish origins.

In another interesting parallel to the Jewish Pope legend, Joan was often said to have come from Mayence, the home of R. Shim'on the Great. Döllinger explains that "[t]he rise of the myth falls into the period of the great contest between the papacy and the empire... [T]he men of Mayence represent the usurpation of the empire by Germans, in violation of the birthright of Rome."⁵⁸ Similarly, Joan's studies in Athens, as mentioned in the legend, recall the primacy of Athens as the center of scholarship in the ancient world. Since even a fictional woman Pope, if she would dare to become pregnant while in office, could not have been called pious, the only remaining way for Joan to have "attain[ed] to the highest office in the Church is through eminent scholarship such as that represented by ancient Athens."⁵⁹

53. Döllinger, pp. 15-16.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-54.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

To this day, the legend of the Jewish Pope has remained popular. The LAV is the version usually retold, and it probably owes its popularity to its publication in the *Mayse-Bukh*, as discussed above. It has been adapted into poetry and drama, and retold in Jewish children's storybooks and magazines.⁶⁰

Use of the LAV, the one version which has a happy ending, in most modern retellings, is typical of the current tendency to "sanitize" published folktales. Robert Darnton discusses the modification of originally violent and gory tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood" in modern editions, in comparison to older versions of the same stories as recorded from eighteenth-century informants.⁶¹ The legend of the Jewish Pope was similarly adapted, initially for a seventeenth-century audience (as in the *Mayse-Bukh*) and later for nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers. The legend retained its popularity, at least through the nineteenth century, as a result of the continuing inter-religious conflict, and later became known as a sort of Jewish fairy tale.

Ba'al Shem Tov Story

One later Jewish use of the Jewish Pope motif is a tale concerning the eighteenth-century ḥasidic leader, R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name"). In the story, as retold by both Kotliansky and Buber,⁶² a wealthy Jew is delighted to play host to a ḥasid of the late Ba'al Shem Tov. He eagerly asks the ḥasid to relate a story about the master, but the ḥasid, although famous for knowledge of many such stories, cannot remember a single one. After spending the Sabbath with his host, the ḥasid departs, quite embarrassed and dejected. Suddenly he remembers a story, and returns to the home of his host, who listens intently to the account.

The Ba'al Shem Tov (relates the ḥasid) once traveled to a city where the Pope (or a bishop, according to Buber) was delivering a public sermon. The rabbi sent this ḥasid to summon the Pope, who heeded the call and came to the house where the Ba'al Shem Tov was staying. The two

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

60. See "Aunt Naomi" [Gertrude Landa], "The Pope's Game of Chess," in *Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends* [1919] (New York: Bloch, 1952), pp. 213-24; Baila Minkoff, "A Legend of Old," *Haderekh* 7, no. 42 (1959): 8-9; and Trunk (see note 46). Also cf. Annette Labovitz, *Secrets of the Past, Bridges to the Future* (Miami: Central Agency for Jewish Education, 1984), pp. 28-32, in which both Elhanan's return home and his (later) martyrdom are incorporated into one version.

61. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* [1984] (New York: Vintage, 1985), pp. 9-15.

62. S[olomon] S[olomonovitch] Kotliansky, "The Salvation of a Soul," in *Feast of Leviathan*, Leo W. Schwartz comp. and ed. (New York: Rinehart, 1956), pp. 343-350; Martin Buber, "The Forgotten Story," in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Maurice Friedman, trans. (New York: Harper, 1955), pp. 107-120.

spent a long time behind the closed door of a room; then both the rabbi and the ḥasid left the town.

The ḥasid adds that he does not know what happened in the room where the Ba'al Shem Tov spoke to the Pope. Incredibly, his wealthy Jewish host volunteers to finish the story. He explains that he was that Pope, a former Jew who had been visited by the rabbi in his dreams and told to return to Judaism. The rabbi's visit came just at the moment when he might have made the wrong decision. The Ba'al Shem Tov had promised, adds the host, that one day he would be told his own story, and that this would signal his true penitence and complete forgiveness. He was, therefore, most anxious to hear a story from this ḥasid, and when none was forthcoming, he took this as a sign that he must intensify his prayer and repentance. When the ḥasid returned and told his story — the host concludes — he knew he had finally been forgiven.

This complex tale-within-a-tale emphasizes the possibility for penitence and return to Judaism at any time, and the hope that all apostates, no matter what their positions, will choose to return. In this respect, it is certainly an heir to the Jewish Pope motif and its meaning. The legend is especially close to the LAV with respect to repentance always being an option, even for the Pope. The tale was collected from the oral tradition by Koteliansky, who recorded it from his mother. It is quite possible, therefore, that it inherited the Jewish Pope motif through oral transmission in eighteenth-or nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, the center of Hasidism.

"Der Yiddisher Poypst"

A twentieth-century Yiddish retelling of the story by Y.Y. Trunk (n. 46 above), mentioned above for its use of Biblical quotations, is a beautiful work which adds some European folktale motifs to the original tale. At the beginning of the story, R. Shim'on is childless. He prays for a child, but is disturbed by a dream containing a trebled prophecy of Elhanan's birth, apostasy, and eventual return. Subsequently, Elhanan is born. [Trebled signs of future events, and the miraculous birth of the hero to childless parents, were similarly identified by Vladimir Propp as common motifs in numerous Russian wondertales.⁶³]

During R. Shim'on's stay among the Jews of Rome, Trunk has him attend a mandatory Christian sermon to the Jews, symbolizing once again the inter-religious conflict of the period. Yet, Trunk presents a cheerful picture in which R. Shim'on and the Roman Jews stuff their ears with cotton before the sermon, and communicate in sign language. R. Shim'on and the leader of the Roman Jewish community emerge, after the event, deep in conversation over the Jewish laws concerning idolatry.

63. Cf. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Laurence Scott, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 119-25.

"Zaydlus der Ershter"

It is interesting to compare the original legend to a story written in the United States in the mid-twentieth century — Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Zaydlus der Ershter," or "Zydlus the First."⁶⁴ Singer's story is an original work, but uses the old motif of the Jewish Pope in an interesting way. In the story, Zaydel Cohen, a brilliant but haughty Jew, is tempted by his evil inclination to convert to Christianity, a religion which will properly honor him for his erudition, possibly even rewarding him with its highest office, the papacy. Zaydel loses his faith and does convert, only to discover that officials of the Church are no more altruistic than were their Jewish counterparts. Now disillusioned with all religion, Zaydel squanders his father's inheritance and becomes a sick old pauper. As he sits on the church steps begging for alms, he remembers the Torah that he had learned in his youth (*girso de-yankuso*), while his mastery of Christian theology vanishes. Eventually, he despairs of finding any truth in the world. Ironically, it is his entrance into Hell that finally cheers him, for the existence of evil proves the existence of good.

As Shalom Rosenberg has explained, "[t]he conclusion of the story essentially shows us that there is meaning within evil, within the very depths of evil."⁶⁵ Rather than denying the existence of absolute, objective evil, notes Rosenberg, the author acknowledges this force. Not content to end on such a pessimistic note, however, Singer uses the reality of evil as the basis for a "strange and paradoxical leap" of faith, according to Rosenberg: he employs the Talmudic reasoning of an *a fortiori* argument (*kal va-homer*) to prove that if Satan exists, then God, too, must exist.⁶⁶

The original legend of the Jewish Pope reflected the circumstances of Jewish life in Christian Europe. Singer's story was published in 1943, amid the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, and his use of the Jewish Pope motif as a means of examining the power of evil is a reflection of the bestial violence inflicted on Europe during the Holocaust. Singer's story betrays a conviction that, despite the evil that is clearly present in the world, especially that directed against the Jew, there exists an ultimate good.

Another point may also be gleaned from Singer's story. The author's imagery is clearly a corruption of the original legend. For example, Zaydel is described as ugly and unpersonable even in his youth, in sharp contrast to the boy in the legend, whose personality and appearance are praised. Most remarkable, in comparison to the legend, is Zaydel's voluntary decision to convert. This inversion of motifs bespeaks an inversion of meaning for Singer as well. Whereas the medieval legend appealed to

64. In Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Der Sotn in Goray* (New York: F. Matones, 1943), pp. 273-286.

65. Shalom Rosenberg, *Tov va-Ra be-Hagut ha-Yehudit* ([Jerusalem]: Ministry of Defense Publishers, 1985), p. 100; my translation.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101; my translation.

oppressed Jews, Singer's story is directed toward Jews who enjoy at least *de jure* equality with their non-Jewish neighbors. Writing in twentieth-century America, site of perhaps the most comfortable Jewish exile, Singer is acquainted with Jews who desire willingly to assimilate, to leave the fold, a feeling uncommon among medieval Jewry. When Singer has Zaydel forget Christian theology as easily as he learned it, while remembering that which he learned in his youth, he expresses his belief that one cannot successfully abandon one's Jewish heritage even if one wishes to do so. Singer's message is addressed to a community of American Jews, many of whom considered assimilation preferable to faithfulness to their tradition. In these new circumstances, vastly different from those of medieval Jewry, the legend is adapted to convey a new message.

VI

The legend of the Jewish Pope arose as an expression by medieval Jews of their inwardly defiant reaction to their political status under Christian rule in Europe. Essentially, it updated an earlier Jewish legend about Saint Peter, but, in its new incarnation, the story drew motifs from the Bible as well as from contemporary Jewish messianism. The details of the legend were also made to reflect the realities of contemporary European Jewish life.

The experience of oppression did not start with medieval Jews; on the contrary, there are numerous examples of suffering, and instances of the Jews being treated as outsiders, in both Biblical and post-Biblical Jewish literature. It was natural for the authors of the legend to employ these images in the story of the Jewish Pope, thus linking the medieval Jewish experience to the eternity of Jewish history. The remarkable longevity and persistent popularity of the legend may be explained in a similar fashion: as long as Jews lived under conditions of oppression, especially when in conflict with the Church, the legend reminded them of the long history and steadfast faith of their people. It was, therefore, faithfully preserved and retold.

The legend began as a sketchy outline, but developed into an elaborate story with a form much like that of the European fairy tale. This evolution reflects the influence of other European folklore on the legend, especially during its dissemination via the primarily Yiddish oral tradition. Like many other European folktales, the legend has today become a children's story, and its best-known version — the latest to evolve — features a happy ending.

Lévi-Straussian structural analysis assumes that the human mind conceives of the world in terms of binary oppositions, and methods of mediation between these pairs. The theory further maintains that these oppositions constitute the deep structure of a culture's myths. Through a brief examination of the history of medieval European Jewry, we have at-

tempted to show that the world view of this particular group of people was, indeed, constructed of such oppositions, most notably those between Judaism and Christianity, and between this world and the World to Come, the two dyads upon which the legend of the Jewish Pope is based. The juxtaposition of historical and structural analysis, then, yields, a consistent picture of a society which saw the world in terms of binary oppositions, and of a legend from that society which is structured around two such oppositions. At the same time, it reveals these irreconcilable oppositions as the foundations of the powerful medieval Jewish faith, which strengthened the Jews in their resolve never to succumb to the oppression that they suffered at the hands of the religious majority which surrounded them.