
NEW TITLES

History

A HISTORY OF THE JEWS

by Paul Johnson
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How have Jews—few in number, deliberately separatist, often endangered—survived as a group, and with what effect on the world? Using biographies of outstanding Jews, British journalist Johnson, himself a Christian, traces 4,000 years of Jewish history from Abraham to Shimon Peres.

In A.D. 135, Hadrian's troops dismantled the Jewish state and dispersed its citizens across the Roman Empire. Spanish, or Sephardic, Jews learned Ladino (a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish), and flourished. Throughout the early Middle Ages, Jews brought Hebrew, Latin, and Arab culture to the backwaters of Europe. Maimonides, a 12th-century religious thinker and physician, wrote in Arabic and moved freely between Egypt and Morocco. But if "treatment of the Jews under Islam varied" says Johnson, "it was always bad under Byzantine rule."

Under European Christians, Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, blamed for the Black Death throughout Europe, and barred from business in Italy, Provence, and Germany. Many Rhineland Jews, or Ashkenazim, fled to Eastern Europe, for "by the year 1500, Poland was . . . the safest country in Europe for Jews."

In 1516, Venice levied a special tax on its Jews and confined them to the site of an old foundry, or "ghetto," where rents were one-third higher than the going rate. "Jewish communities accepted oppression," says Johnson, ". . . provided it had definite rules The ghetto offered security and . . . made the observance of the law easier . . . by concentrating and isolating Jews."

Jews continued to face twin evils wherever they succeeded: anti-Semitism on the one hand; loss of identity through assimilation on the other. Hayyim (better known as Heinrich) Heine (1797–1856) was the archetypical emancipated Jew. Heine went to a Catholic school, lived in France, and wrote in German. He rejected Talmudic Judaism, disliked Reform Jews, and despised converts—calling his own baptism "the entrance ticket to European culture."

Jews endure, suggests Johnson, because they have "believed they were a special people with such unanimity and passion, and over so long a span, that they became one."