

# MARTYRDOM THROUGH THE AGES

*Shmuel Shepkaru*

The following section on Jewish martyrdom reflects important new developments in a changing scholarly scene. For a long time, a number of early studies in the history of Christianity, which viewed Christian martyrdom as an expansion of a Jewish ideal, and the lachrymose approach to Jewish history itself, jointly perpetuated the notion that martyrdom has always been an integral part of Judaism, the natural result of the Jews' religious conflicts with foreign powers. In recent years, however, a growing number of works have demonstrated that Jewish martyrdom (or *kiddush ha-Shem*) is a much more multifaceted and mysterious phenomenon than anyone previously imagined. Defying Albert Camus' assertion in *The Fall* that martyrs can never be understood, scholars have attempted to explain why some Jews opted for death over life, while others did not. They have raised similar questions with regard to entire Jewish communities. On a larger scale yet, they have inquired into the phenomenal and conceptual developments of martyrdom. When did the idea of martyrdom enter Judaism and why? When and why did the idea of abandoning life voluntarily become an ideal, and how did it develop into an ideology?

Other studies have addressed the

process of reutilization and memorialization. Their authors have sought to explain the transformation of martyrological reports into martyrologies, some of which are still part of the liturgy today. Without denying the historical value of these martyrologies, scholars have critically scrutinized their objectivity and objectives. Still other researchers have investigated the employment of the martyrological notion in an assortment of sources: folkloric, mystical, historical, legal, and fictional, to mention a few. All of this has made it possible for representatives of diverse disciplines within Jewish studies to come together to investigate the topic of martyrdom in an interdisciplinary fashion.

In this issue of *AJS Perspectives*, we present a small sample of recent developments in this field of scholarship. The essays follow a historiographical lane from the late antique Near East, through medieval Europe, to the present State of Israel. Daniel Schwartz's essay compares two Jewish works of the Hellenistic period, which uphold different types of resistance to Greek rule. While one idealizes militant confrontation, the other endorses the voluntary death of the noncombatant. The comparison illustrates how local needs determine the idealization of Jewish

behavior. Joseph Dan's essay addresses the transition from martyrdom to martyrology in early mystical-rabbinic works. This transition appears to have very little to do with any external threat and seems to be connected with the emergence within Jewish society of a mystical-rabbinic circle. Self-sacrifice in these works constitutes the mystics' expression of love for the divine. Also "sacrificed" in these works are the authoritative Talmudic stories for the sake of a more fictionalized depiction of the sages' executions. These mystical-fantastic narratives were among a set of stories (biblical, apocryphal, and Talmudic) that later on captured the imagination of medieval Jews. Yet in numerous instances medieval martyrs are reported to have surpassed the early examples of martyrs being killed by their oppressors. In the Middle Ages, some Jewish martyrs are reported to have taken their own lives and even the lives of loved ones.

The Middle Ages can therefore be regarded as a period of what Robert Chazan here characterizes as "radical" *kiddush ha-Shem*. Certainly, the violent efforts to convert Jews to Christianity shaped the radical martyrological reaction. But the radicalization of *kiddush ha-Shem* also reflects the exposure of medieval Jews to the cultural and religious ideals of the Christian

society in the midst of which they lived. Eva Haverkamp's essay shows how Jews incorporated Christian symbols and even Christian sacred spaces into their narratives to prove the paradoxical point that they were worlds apart.

Such symbolic embellishment may stand in the way of the search for historical truth. Miriam Bodian's essay on the case of a crypto-Jewish martyr makes this point and demonstrates the need to utilize a variety of texts, if they are available,

in order to remedy this drawback. In the case she describes, the records of the Inquisition tribunals reveal a surprising twist to the story. Martyrdom and myth in modern Hebrew literature is the concern of the final essay, by Yael Feldman. Feldman describes how history and religion converged in Zionist poetry to assist in the creation of a new national Israeli mythology. At least symbolically—the essays presented here barely scratch the surface of our vast topic—we have thus come full circle. The choice in late

antiquity between a militant or martyrological model surfaces anew in modern-time Israeli literature. But as the essays here show, martyrdom was never just a matter of choice.

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