

RADICAL JEWISH MARTYRDOM

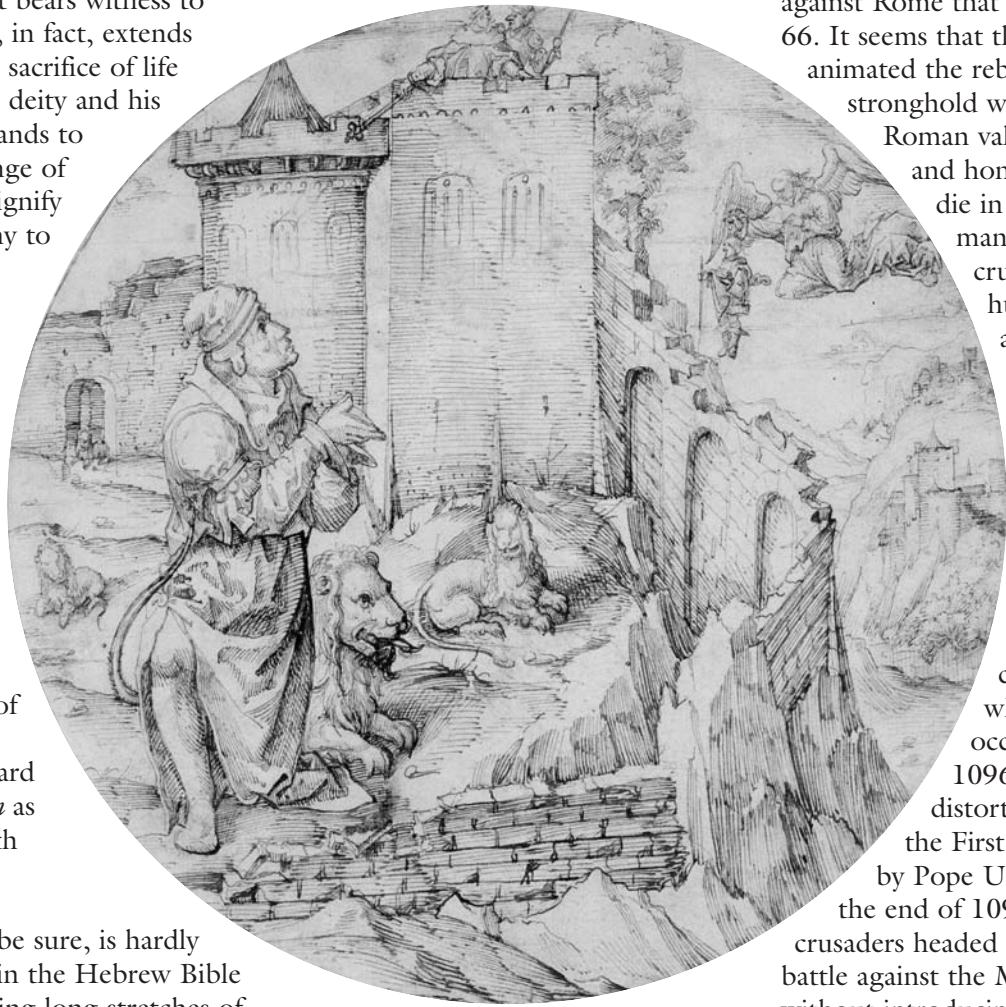
Robert Chazan

The Hebrew term *kiddush ha-Shem* (Sanctifying the Divine Name) is generally translated as martyrdom, the willingness to die in a manner that bears witness to God. This term, in fact, extends well beyond the sacrifice of life on behalf of the deity and his covenantal demands to cover a wide range of behaviors that signify human testimony to God in multiple ways, some of them rather mundane. However, since the most dramatic and hence the most striking form of *kiddush ha-Shem* is the sacrifice of life itself on behalf of God, there is a tendency to regard *kiddush ha-Shem* as synonymous with martyrdom.

Martyrdom, to be sure, is hardly a salient theme in the Hebrew Bible corpus, and during long stretches of Jewish history it did not play a significant role in Jewish thinking and behavior. Normative rabbinic law did identify three major transgressions that if forced upon Jews had to be resisted even at the cost of life. A number of important historic figures, including Daniel and his companions, who purportedly lived under Persian rule, and key rabbinic leaders living

under Roman domination during the second century, were prepared to give up their lives rather than transgress the prohibition of worshipping idols. The willingness of the former to die and the actual deaths of the latter were remembered, memorialized, and valorized by subsequent Jewish tradition. Indeed, the martyrs of the second century were inserted into the very heart of the Yom Kippur liturgy, an indication of profound veneration for their heroism. Still,

concern as well. Sometimes they took recourse to extreme forms of sacrifice of life, extending far beyond the rabbinic demand for acquiescence to death under certain limited circumstances. On some occasions, Jews did not wait for their persecutors to inflict death; in these unusual instances, Jews took their own lives and even the lives of loved ones. One of the best known of these cases of radical Jewish martyrdom took place at Masada, the last stronghold of the rebellion against Rome that began in the year 66. It seems that the ideals that animated the rebels in this last stronghold were largely Roman values of heroism and honor, the desire to die in a dignified manner and to avoid cruel and humiliating death at the hands of the Roman legions.



Daniel in the Lions' Den, design for stained glass, by Lucas van Leyden, 1509-1533. © Trustees of the British Museum.

from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, the idea of martyrdom by no means dominated Jewish thinking.

Jews living in societies in which martyrdom emerged as a core religious value absorbed this value and made it a central Jewish

A second, well-known instance of radical Jewish martyrdom took place in the Rhineland Jewish communities, where assaults occurred in spring 1096 as a result of a distortion of the call to the First Crusade issued by Pope Urban II toward the end of 1095. While most crusaders headed eastward to do battle against the Muslim foe without introducing Jews into their thinking or their campaign, some northern-French popular bands undertook a crusade against the Jewish infidels closer to home. The large and unruly popular band that coalesced around the charismatic figure of Peter the Hermit seems to have engaged in the financial exploitation of its Jewish enemy. The German popular bands, galvanized into action by the

preaching of Peter and his associates, expanded their anti-Jewish message into a more extreme call either to kill or to convert Jewish communities in their entirety.

While the sources for the extreme Jewish behavior can hardly be deemed copious, there are enough independent testimonies, largely Jewish, but including some Christian narratives as well, to establish the reality of radical Jewish martyrdom that went far beyond the rabbinic requirement that Jews acquiesce to death at the hands of their persecutors. The Rhineland Jews, confronted with the demand for conversion or death, took their own lives and the lives of their children in massive displays of what they perceived to be utter fidelity to the demands of their covenant with the God of Israel. Since these Jews were intensely proud of their commitment to the halakhic norms and the rich *aggadic* legacy of rabbinic Judaism, their behavior has proven something of a puzzle to modern scholars.

The narratives bequeathed to us by the Jewish survivors of the 1096 persecution are lavish in their praise of the radical martyrs of that year. Interestingly, these sources make no effort to justify the radical behaviors in terms of the norms of Jewish law. In their reconstructions of the utterances of the radical martyrs of 1096 and in their third-person observations on these martyrs, the Jewish narrators make no mention of halakhic norms, either in defense of, or as a challenge to, the behaviors they record. There is recurrent mention of historic precedents, but these references are highly problematic. The martyrs themselves and their chroniclers regularly cite the biblical figures from the book of Daniel and the rabbinic sages who fell victim to Roman persecution. As noted, however, the behaviors of Daniel and his companions and the

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rabbinic sages of the second century did not presage the radical suicides and killings carried out by the Rhineland Jews; rather, these earlier behaviors fit the standard mold envisioned by the rabbinic norms—acquiescence to death at the hands of non-Jewish persecutors. The powerful precedent more regularly invoked was the patriarch Abraham, who is portrayed in the biblical narrative as having been fully prepared to offer up his beloved son Isaac in response to divine demand. The problem with this imagery is, of course, the fact that the divine demand was rescinded, and Isaac was spared. While the Rhineland Jews used this discrepancy to extol their own virtues projecting themselves as achieving greatness beyond that of their forebear Abraham, the divine decision to test Abraham by demanding the sacrifice of Isaac and then rescinding the demand raised more questions than it answered. Subsequent Ashkenazic rabbinic authorities could not produce halakhic or *aggadic* justification for the radical acts of 1096, although this failure by no means led them to censure these behaviors. To the contrary, these rabbinic authorities by and large insisted on the rectitude of the martyrs' conduct, despite their failure to provide requisite justification.

Haym Soloveitchik, who has studied these episodes of radical martyrdom

carefully, has concluded that there is in fact no halakhic justification for these unusual behaviors. He suggests that these instances of Jews taking their own lives and the lives of loved ones constitute deviations from standard Jewish legal norms. Soloveitchik, sensitive to social factors as well as halakhic norms, suggests that momentous considerations must have led the Rhineland Jews of 1096 to depart so strikingly from the legal norms to which they were so intensely devoted (*AJS Review* 12:2 and *Jewish Quarterly Review* 94:1 and 2).

Some time ago, I suggested that the radical Jewish behaviors of 1096 must be understood against the backdrop of the remarkable religious fervor unleashed by the papal call to the Crusade. While it is highly unlikely that Pope Urban II intended to elicit this explosive popular enthusiasm, in fact his call struck a powerful nerve in rapidly developing western Christendom. While some of the warriors who set out on the mission were motivated by cooler visions of the enterprise, many were moved by imagery of radical, religiously inspired self-sacrifice. Among the popular German bands, this readiness for self-sacrifice was especially prominent. To the extent that willingness to serve God through extreme self-sacrifice became the hallmark of late-eleventh-century

religiosity, Jews caught up in the spirit of the age absorbed this willingness for self-sacrifice and expressed their dedication with an anti-Christian competitive edge through their unusual martyrological behaviors (see my book, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, University of California Press, 1987).

More recently I have proposed yet another possible factor to explain the radical Jewish martyrdoms of 1096. Close reexamination of the Hebrew narratives has revealed Jewish perceptions of millenarian convictions among the popular

crusading bands responsible for the Rhineland attacks. Again, there is no evidence that Pope Urban II introduced millenarian elements in his call to the crusade. Once more, however, the popular response went well beyond the papal call. The millenarian excitement seemingly spawned a parallel enthusiasm among the Jewish minority. For both Christian attackers and Jewish victims, the onset of a new era meant the suspension of normal constraints, which allowed—indeed encouraged—the attackers to contravene traditional Christian safeguards established for Jewish safety and security and moved the

Jewish victims to break with the traditional Jewish norms of martyrdom (*Speculum* 84:2). The traditional moderation of Christian policy towards Judaism and Jews and the Jewish position on the taking of human life were subverted by the destabilizing impact of millenarian expectations.

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