Reading 3B

BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Questions:
1. How did Jews maintain a community after being scattered throughout Europe?
2. How and why did the early Christians set themselves apart from other Jews?
3. How did some Christians view the Jews during the Middle Ages?
4. What were some of the differences between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages?
5. How were Jews discriminated against during the Middle Ages?
6. What occupations were available to Jews as a result of this discrimination during the Middle Ages?
7. Why did Christians believe that Jews murdered Christian children?
8. What were some of the gains made by Jews during the 19th century?
9. What were some of the characteristics racists claimed Jews inherited?
10. How did people react to the belief that Jews inherited "rootlessness"?
11. Is there any historical evidence to support the myths of Jews as devils and murderers?

As a result of the conquests of their biblical homeland by Persians, Greeks, Assyrians and Romans, Jews were scattered throughout Europe. However, the Hebrew Bible created unity among the Jews even though they settled far from each other in very different cultures. They continued to pray in Hebrew, even as they took on the languages of the different host nations. They also continued to follow the laws and religious observances of the Bible. They carried with them their customs, religious rituals and beliefs.

At first, anti-Jewish feelings were primarily a religious matter. Christianity was a child of Judaism and considered one of its branches or sects. Jesus was a Jew who quoted from and interpreted the Hebrew Bible. Yet, the dilemma for the early Christians arose from the refusal of other Jews to accept Jesus as the messiah. There had been Jewish groups that had accepted earlier messiahs. None of those groups, however, had broken with the teachings of Paul. He sought to gain non-Jewish followers for Christianity. Paul accomplished this by dropping the requirements of conversion: Christians would no longer have to follow the dietary and ritual laws of Judaism. He also abandoned the requirement of circumcision considered by Jews to be the biblical mark of the "covenant of Abraham." Paul's followers became the new Christians, separated from the parent religion, Judaism.

When the Jews tried to drive the Romans out of their homeland, the Roman armies destroyed the holy Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This dealt a crushing blow to the Jewish religion, as Jews were driven from their country and dispersed or scattered all over Europe. New Christian communities on the outskirts of the Roman world were unaffected by the destruction of the Temple. Their separation from Judaism widened even more.

Europe gradually became Christian through wandering Christian missionaries like Paul. In the 3rd century A.D., Christianity had achieved such success that it became the official

religion of the Roman Empire. Jews were a small minority. They were considered foreigners and outsiders, strangely different. Some church officials even accused them of being agents of the devil.

The Jews continued their religious and social practices and, consequently, set themselves apart from Christian society. Christians were no longer instructed in the Hebrew Bible and often forgot the roots they shared with Jews. Jews persisted in praying in Hebrew, reading from right to left. Christians saw Hebrew as a collection of symbols having to do with witchcraft. Jews ate different foods and refused to eat what Christians ate, pork, for example. Christians saw these differences as mysterious and evil. Jews celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday rather than on Sunday. Christians called this witch's or devils' Sabbath.

As they had for thousand of years, Jews practiced circumcision as a sign of their "covenant with God." Christians saw this as an evil custom somehow related to the sign of the devil. Eventually, Jews dressed differently. They maintained traditional customs, like growing long beards, while modern practice changed to shaving. Jews became stereotypes in their physical appearance. It should be noted that Jews dressed differently largely because they were forced to by gentile legislation.

Throughout the Middle Ages, local governments discriminated against Jews, denying them the right to own land or hold public office. Medieval unions (guilds) refused membership to Jews so that they could not work in many occupations. The effect of this prejudicial treatment and isolation was to force Jews into commerce, and many became merchants. Although the majority remained poor, some became wealthy. Because the Church prohibited money lending, Jews were among the first bankers. The historical condition would foster a stereotype of Jews as money lenders. That stereotype would increase persecution, especially in economically hard times.

From the 12th to the 20th centuries, Jews were persecuted, tried and murdered on the basis of many myths. The myth that Jews murdered Christian children, for example, was created in Norwich, England, around 1150 by a superstitious priest and an insane monk when a Christian boy was found dead. The boy was probably killed by an outlaw. The two clergymen invented the story that this murder was part of a Jewish plot to kill Christian children. The myth became more mysterious and complicated when the story that Jews required the blood of Christian children to make unleavened bread (matzos) for Passover was invented and added to it. Even some saints had supposedly accused Jews of murdering Christian children for their blood. Such stories spread across Europe and the Nazis would later manipulate them and other legends to stimulate racist anti-Semitism.

From the late Middle Ages on, anti-Semitism was expressed in many ways. Jews were expelled from cities or forced to live in restricted areas. Jews were excluded from various occupations and denied citizenship. However, in the second half of the 19th century, Europe became more democratic. The full or partial emancipation of the Jews was achieved in Prussia, France, England and other nations. This meant that Jews officially were granted limited or full civil rights by governments. Also, some economic and social

restrictions were gradually removed by law. However, anti-Semitic feelings and beliefs lingered. Myths, superstitions and deep-seated beliefs still clung to Europeans and had become part of the fabric of their civilization. Occasionally, anti-Semitism exploded into violence.

The 19th century saw the beginnings of an anti-Semitism not based on religion but on theories that Jews were a separate "race." At the time, "race" meant a group of people set apart because of genetically inherited characteristics such as skin color. Some even believed that cultural characteristics such as beliefs, customs and behaviors were inherited by members of a race.

By distorting Jewish history, 19th century racists labeled Jews as wanderers who inherited their "rootlessness" through their "blood." Thus, their nature was determined by heredity and unchangeable. Wanderers were strangers; and as in the Middle Ages, people feared strangers. They saw them as dangerous criminals, wrapped in mystery and evil. Hate-mongers claimed that for the safety of Christian children, Jews had to be avoided. Or, better yet, they urged that Jews should be kept at a distance or driven out of Christian communities. There was no other choice—character was inherited, it could not be changed. Such a theory, pretending to be scientific, was adopted by Hitler and others who transformed theory to practice in the Holocaust.

Poor farmers and struggling urban people were suffering from the effects of the industrial revolution of the 19th century. Many lost their land. Many lost their jobs. Many lost their status and prestige. Worse, growing numbers of them could not feed their families or provide shelter for them in the new environment of the city slum. Nothing was certain any more. Some blamed their situation on the "rootless Jew" who became a scapegoat. They repeated the stories about the "rootless wandering Jew" and the ritual murders. They harped on the Jews as merchants and bringers of urban, commercial civilization.

Anti-Semites in the 19th and 20th centuries inflamed fear and hatred that had lurked beneath the surface. The myth of a world Jewish conspiracy was fostered by a notorious forgery called *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.* This book claimed that the Jews of the world were plotting to take over the governments of Christian countries and, thereby, added fuel to the fire.

The myths and stereotypes of Jews were based on deliberate lies and ancient superstitions. It did not even matter if anti-Semites knew Jews who did not fit the stereotypes. Because they are based on irrational fear or resentment, stereotypes reject specific evidence. The real world does not matter when fear, superstition and resentment are at work.

With an ancient tradition of religious hostility to draw upon, racism brought together fake scientific theories and anti-Jewish stereotypes. It offered solutions to economic and social problems and promised a hope for a better future once the offending group was removed from society. Without critical thinking or questioning, frequently in blatant defiance of

Christian morality, educated and uneducated people accepted the stereotypes and the mythology with terrifying results.

A definition of anti-Semitism might be: hostility toward Jews as individuals, toward Judaism as a religion, toward the Jewish people as a group. Throughout history, it has expressed itself through religious prejudice, social exclusion, economic boycotts, restrictive laws, physical attacks, killings and exiling of identifiable Jews.

Different Types of Anti-Semitism

- o Religious anti-Semitism: Through the Middle Ages, the persecution of the Jews was based on religious differences (rituals, belief in Jesus as the messiah, etc.). If Jews would convert to Christianity, they would be accepted. If they did not convert, they were segregated, expelled or killed.
- o Secular anti-Semitism: Beginning around the 18th century, as Europe became less religious, Jews suffered social and economic discrimination. They were forced to live in restricted areas, denied citizenship, excluded from various occupations, etc. Even if they converted to Christianity, Christian communities would not accept them.
- o Racial anti-Semitism: By the late 19th century, Jews were seen as an inferior and dangerous "race." Racists argued that, like blue eyes, historically determined cultural traits such as business skills were passed on through the genes. The "logic" of this thinking leads to extermination.

Summary: The history of anti-Semitism can, thus, be summed up as described by Raul Hilberg in *The Destruction of the European Jews* as
- o Religious: You may not live among us as Jews.
- o Secular: You may not live among us.
- o Racial: You may not live.