

## Exile from England: The Expulsion of the Jews in 1290

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Why did the English crown expel the Jews in 1290? Historians have ascribed economical, ecclesiastical, and political motives to the expulsion of the Jews. This essay examines the relationship between the economy, the church, and the government of thirteenth century England, and her Jewish residents, in order to determine which, if any, had the greatest influence on the expulsion of the Jews, and in order to understand how one group of people—once vital to a nation—could be summarily expelled.

Medieval England was primarily an agricultural society; hence investment in capital did not come readily to them. Yet, because they could not own land in England the only profession in which Jews could participate was money-lending. The kings of England would use the Jews as a way of indirectly taxing their servants. The king could tax the Jews, which in turn would cause the Jews to demand payment on their loans from their debtors. If the Jews and their debtors could amass the necessary funds, then the king had his revenue. If the Jews could not secure the tax, then the king could imprison them and seize their property. This property was in many cases the deeds to land, which debtors had used as collateral. Therefore, the king, through the taxation of the Jews, was able to enhance his absolute power. In 1230, Henry III requested £6000 for army pay. In 1236, ten of the richest Jews were used as a security deposit to force their brethren to pay £10,000. In 1240, the Jews were called upon to pay a tax of £20,000 or about one-third of their property. When the Jews refused to pay, the crown took their property as payment for the tax and arrested them, along with their wives and children. In 1251, a new tax of £10,000 was issued. Between 1227 and 1259, Henry III taxed the Jews of England £250,000. The historian Cecil Roth claimed “The King [Henry III] was like a spendthrift with a cheque-book, drawing one amount after another in utter indifference to the dwindling of his resource.” In partial defense of Henry, the Jewish exchequer—the department of the royal government that dealt with keeping track of the finances of Jews—was not very efficient, and so it was difficult for Henry to get a good assessment of what he could tax his Jewish servants. Moreover, the prevailing stereotype that the word Jew was synonymous with wealth may have blinded Henry.

The Jews continued as moneylenders until 1274 when King Edward returned from a crusade. The crusades had ironically allowed the Jews to make a great deal of money. The Jews did this by lending money to the English knights who wanted to wage war against the Muslims in the East. Moreover, monasteries borrowed money as well to create new churches.

In one instance, “27 pounds were borrowed from a Jew and 4 years later 880 pounds were owed.” When Edward returned from the East, he created *The Statute of the Jewry*. In the statute, Edward dictated, “from henceforth no Jew shall lend anything at usury, either upon land, or upon rent, or upon other thing.” This was a severe blow to the Jews of England. The statute further attacked the Jews, proclaiming “that each one after he should be twelve years old, pay Three pence yearly at Easter of tax to the king of whose bond man he is.” Roth argued that although Edward I was pious and denounced the borrowing of money he continued to exact taxes upon the Jews until they had nothing left to give. Roth may have a good point here. Edward’s piety is perhaps evident in his willingness to go on Crusades. But how much of Edward’s decision was based on his piety? In his *Statute of the Jewry*, Edward denounced money lending, but he continued to tax the Jews, who Roth claimed had been “reduced to pawnbrokers.” Consequently, the unceasing taxes decimated the Jewish communities’ ability to survive. Furthermore, the *statute* did not allow the Jews to practice usury, thereby making it impossible for the Jews to keep their position as the chief moneylenders of England.

In the thirteenth century, the English accepted foreign artisans into their land and participated in foreign trade abroad. Christianity was the bridge that made it possible for the English to conduct business with aliens. Unfortunately for the Jews, England’s improved foreign relations allowed relations with Italian moneylenders, who maneuvered their way around the usury laws. They would offer loans with grace periods. When these grace periods elapsed, normal interest would accrue. This payment of interest could be written off as an expense for the sending of the money. In addition, as long as Italian merchants allowed these grace periods, they were allowed to loan money at 60% annual interest, 17% higher than Jewish moneylenders. The *Statute of the Merchants*, or Acton Burnell (1283), gave foreign merchants avenues of relief to which Jewish moneylenders never had access. The statute stated that merchants arriving in ports could take up their claim of debt with the mayor. The first trip to the mayor would result in a date by which the debtor had to repay the mayor. If the merchant was not paid by this date, the mayor had the power to sell the property of the debtor to repay the merchant. The *Statute of the Merchants* was a way for Edward to keep his new moneylenders happy. After Italian financiers moved in and took the position of moneylenders to the Crown, however, the Jews of England were made obsolete.

Because of their economic obsolescence, the next logical action would be to expel the Jews from England. A new allegation would help to speed this process along. The Jews were accused of clipping coins. In this process the coin is clipped or filed down, and the clippings or filings are melted down into bullion. It was this allegation that led Edward I to order every Jew in England arrested. Six hundred Jews were arrested and over two hundred were found guilty and hanged. The Jews of England had been reduced to a state of squalor by the heavy taxations of Henry III. Furthermore, they could not recoup themselves because of the harsh usury legislation that was passed. Indeed, the idea of expelling the Jews from England was not an entirely new one for Edward. He had expelled the Jews from Gascony (France) in 1286. But what could be the most influential document pertaining to the expulsion of the Jews from England was *Charles of Anjou's Edict of Expulsion*—expelling the Jews from the whole of Charles's kingdom—in 1289. The edict proclaims, "Although we enjoy much temporal profit from the aforesaid Jews, we prefer to provide for the peace of our subjects rather than to fill our coffers with the mammon iniquity." The edict states that money obtained from the Jews, is not worth as much as the peace of their subjects. However, the edict also states that subjects "worthy of trust who live and dwell within the confines of those counties it has been conceded to us freely and without duress that we ought receive from each hearth three schillings once only and from each wage earner six pence once only, as some recompense for the profit we lose through the aforesaid expulsions." This is an intriguing way for Charles to make a deal with his subjects; they provide him with a little money and he banishes the blasphemers from their land. However, the section of the edict that Edward might have found most interesting is: "Their goods shall be turned to the lords." If Edward was aware of Charles edict it would provide him with case law for the expulsion of the Jews and the confiscation of their land. Of course, this was not the only reason for the expulsion of the Jews from England.

The ecclesiastical influence upon Edward to expel the Jews from England dates from the fourth Lateran Council, convened at Rome in 1215, which discussed Christian resources being siphoned away by Jewish usury. This council also decided that Jews could not hold public office because the council claimed it would be wrong for a non-believer of Christ to hold power over believers of Christ. The council also decided that Jews were to wear badges. The *Statute of the Jewry* in 1275 reinforced this: "each Jew after he shall be seven years old, Shall wear a badge on his outer garment." The fourth Lateran council was "renewed at synods at Worcester in 1240, at Chichester some six years later, at Salisbury in about 1256, and at Exeter in 1287." The fourth Lateran Council, which would help widen the schism between Jew and Christian, was led by Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). Historian Israel Abrahams asserts that before the rule of Innocent III, relationships between Jews and Christians were friendly; Jews and Christians spoke and dressed the same. However, Abrahams's argument has some holes. In 1190, at the crowning of Richard, a terrible massacre took place. A Christian poet described the massacre.

And midst noble presents, that hither came also  
The wretched wicked Jews that weaned well to do  
And a rich present that they prepared with great pride  
And sent it to the noble king, but small thanks them betide!  
For the king was somewhat vexed, and took it for great shame  
That from such unclean things as them any meat to him came.

The animosity expressed in this poem by the poet towards the Jews, at an event when innocent Jews were killed, is startling. Surely this is not Abraham's idea of friendly relations between Christians and Jews. A Jewish man, Ephraim b. Jacob of Bonn, also described the massacre:

and they went to fall upon them and slay them and their maidservants in their houses, and they slew about thirty men and some of the remainder slew themselves and their children

Two men saw the same event and witnessed two entirely different things. This evidence leads me to disagree with the argument that Jews and Christians had friendly relations before the beginning of the thirteenth century. However, Abrahams's argument that the dress code highlighted distinctions between the adherents of the two religions is more likely accurate. Also of historical importance is a letter from Pope Innocent IV in 1244 to the all archbishops, including those of Canterbury and York, which states that the Jews were, "ungrateful to the lord Jesus Christ who, His forbearance overflowing, patiently awaits their conversion." Ten years later, Henry III established the *Domus Conversorum*, the only home for converts founded by a king.

The Church, at first, turned a blind eye to Jewish usury; because of their religion they did not have to follow the same theological maxims that Christians did. This would change however, beginning with King Edward's return home in 1274. Pope Gregory X urged Christians—throughout the known world—not to participate in usury and take action against those that

do. The historian W.J. Ashley claims that the punishments the church could prescribe did not affect Jews, that is, exclusion from communion and refusal of a Christian burial. Usury would not end until “sovereigns could show self-denial and cruelty enough to drive them [the Jews] out of the kingdom altogether like Edward in 1290.” While sovereigns would have to be cruel, Edward’s decision probably had little to do with self-denial of monies from Jews; at the time of their banishment the Jews were contributing a pittance to the royal coffers due to the legislation of the *Statute of Jewry*.

Perhaps the single biggest Papal incitement to the expulsion of the Jews came from Pope Honorius IV. In a letter to all Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1286, Pope Honorius stated, “the Jews of England studious readers of the Talmud rather than of Moses, were attempting to seduce Catholics to Judaism and converts to relapse.” Pope Honorius further pronounced, “the Jews of England, live with, and corrupted, Christians, they induced converted Jews to live in localities where they were not known and where, therefore, it would be safe to return to their foreign allegiance.” The Pope went on to condemn the English leaders and their actions. This is an interesting letter because one of the key worries of the Pope is unfounded. Pope Honorius claimed, “they induced converted Jews to live in localities where they were not known.” However, according to the *Statute of the Jewry* of 1275, all Jews were only allowed to live in a few urban centers. Furthermore, one historian claims that Edward’s attack on the Jews was “instigated” by the church. Charles of Anjou’s edict may have influenced Edward I in its reference to the church as well:

In many locales of the land, numerous Jews, enemies of the life giving cross and all Christianity, dwelling randomly and publicly among Christians and deviating from the way of truth, subvert many of both sexes who are considered adherents of the Christian faith.

Edward now had two very good reasons to expel the Jews from England: economic and ecclesiastical.

With two solid reasons for expelling the Jews, Edward needed only the strong arm of political righteousness to pitch his Jewish subjects into the sea. Edward I stated in *The Statute of the Jewry*: “And the King Granteth unto them that they may gain their living by lawful merchandise and their labor; and that they may have intercourse with Christians, in order to carry on lawful trade by selling and buying.” He also stated that “And that they may take and buy farms or land for the term of ten years or less.” Of course, this radical attempt by King Edward to inject the Jews into English society was neither well planned nor successful. There were several reasons this part of the *Statute* failed the Jews: in the towns trading was allowed only to the burgesses, which the Jews could not enter because they were considered the “Kings vassals”; they could not join the trade or craft guilds because the guilds thought “presupposed feelings of social sympathy was absent between Jew and Christian”; the Jews were not protected by the *Statute of the Merchants* like foreign merchants, and finally the vocation of agriculture was new to the Jew. In addition, according to the historian Cunningham, because the Jews were hated it was impossible for them to take up ordinary work and they had to prepare for attacks. For example “the ancient house at Lincoln seems to suggest by its plan and arrangement that the inhabitants were prepared to stand a siege.” In this kind of atmosphere Edward’s allowing the Jews into ordinary pursuits was clearly of limited benefit to them.

Besides his statute, there were other forces acting on the king as well. During the Barons’ war and preceding it, Jews were seen as symbols of royal power. The masses found an easier target to abuse in the Jew, than in the King. Roth claimed that Simon de Montfort took the lead against the Jews, seeing in them the power of Royal absolutism (because through the Jews, the king could tax indirectly) and also his own demise (de Montfort owed large sums of money to Jewish moneylenders). An excellent example of both the Jews representing absolute authority, and de Montfort’s own debt to the Jews can be seen in the case of David of Oxford. According to the historian Maddicott “in July [of 1244], he [de Montfort] was pardoned a further debt of 110 pounds, owed to the great Jewish moneylender, David of Oxford, whose recent death had brought many of his loans into the Kings hands.” King Edward triumphed over de Montfort and reestablished the Jewish moneylenders for a while. However, Abrahams asserted it was Edward’s genius that had centralized England and that ultimately led to the expulsion of the Jews. The Jews could no longer play one region against another. A similar situation occurred in Spain where the Jews survived in both Aragon and Castile and met their demise with the unification of the Spanish Crown.

Edward could do whatever he pleased with the Jews, and he did so in 1290 when he expelled them from England. On 18 July, “writs were [sent] to the sheriffs of the various English counties, informing them that a decree had been issued ordering all Jews to leave England before the forthcoming feast of All Saints (November 1<sup>st</sup>); any who remained in the country after the prescribed day were declared liable to the death penalty.” In less than a year, 16,000 men, women and children were dispersed. To give just one account: “Isabella, who was the wife of Adam de Saint Alban’s the younger, those houses and appurtenances in London which belonged to Leo the son of Cresse Son of Master Elias the Jew in the Parish of St. Martin Pomer in Ironmonger Lane through the exile of said Jew from out realm as our escheats remaining in our hands, and which are valued at four pounds.” Acts such as this were common after the expulsion of the Jews from England.

Historians have proposed many reasons why and when the Jews were expelled from England. Abrahams claims the

Jews were never liked by the English and had nothing in common with them. Roth agrees and claims that one way to solve the Jewish problem was to acknowledge them as social equals; he asserts, “[t]his, however, was a conception which could not have occurred to the mind of Jews or Christians in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.” Therefore, it is Cunningham’s observation that religious persecution which forced the Jews to dress differently and to obey strict rules, served no other purpose than to widen the gulf between Jew and Christian. And perhaps Bernard Susser is the most accurate when he states that political minds were not advanced enough at the time to accept people of different religious faiths as equals. The factors therefore which had the greatest impact were religious persecution and economics, which played a role in the expulsion of the Jews, insofar as after the Jews had ceased to be able to lend money the Crown no longer had reason to keep the Jews around. Economic obsolescence and bigotry forced the Jewish population from England.