

Crash Course in Jewish History

Sample Set

Chapter I: Biblical Times

Chapter II: From a United Kingdom to Exile and Diaspora

Chapter III: The Jewish Epicenter Moves West

**Chapter IV: Jews Enter and React to the Modern Era:
From Enlightenment to World War I**

Chapter V: Holocaust and Renewal: 1933 to the Present



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Crash Course in Jewish History 1

SECTION VI. THE JEWS ENTER CANAAN

A. Moses' disciple Joshua, who was appointed as his successor just before Moses' death in the wilderness, led the people into the land of Israel (Jewish year 2488, (A)1436/(B)1272 B.C.E.).

- Many people have an image of Joshua as a warrior, but really Joshua was the foremost student of Moses, and a great Torah scholar. Imagine, his rebbe was Moses! True, he was also a talented military leader, a gifted political leader and the one who brought the Jews into the land of Israel, but he was all of this because he had the ability to be a spiritual leader as well.

- We've already encountered Joshua, if you remember. He and Caleb were the two spies who presented positive reports regarding the land of Israel. Early on, Joshua showed his strong leadership skills.

B. The Jews began their conquest of the land of Israel during the same season of the year that the Jews left the land of Egypt. Both events took place 40 years apart in the month of Nisan, during spring time. Nisan is known, therefore, as the month of redemption, redemption from Egypt and now redemption from the wilderness and delivery into the land of Israel.

C. You may be familiar with the land of Israel - (if there is no map, use hand motions to set up layout) - Mediterranean Sea, the land of Israel, the Jordan, and the other side of the Jordan river, the land of Moav or what is today called Jordan. The Jews entered Moav from the south, and marched into Israel north of the Dead Sea. They crossed the Jordan River and the first location they hit was the city of...(come on, Joshua fought the battle of...) Jericho. Coming into Israel, they immediately had to conquer the city of Jericho, the first significant Canaanite city.

- The Jews sent letters to the Canaanites because G-d had instructed the Jewish people to enter Israel and to offer the Canaanites 3 possibilities:

- They could remain in the land of Canaan, but they must accept monotheism and Jewish rule.

- They could leave.

- They could fight.

- The 31 Canaanite city-states chose to fight. The fighting lasted for 7 years.

D. For 7 years the Canaanites fought the Jews, but the Jews were victorious. When the fighting concluded, the land was divided

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among the 12 tribes. Joshua and the Jews entered Israel, and thus begins the period of the Jewish Commonwealth.

- This was a difficult and bloody campaign, chronicled in the Book of Joshua.

- The 12 tribes finally settled in Israel, which included the Golan Heights and also the area known today as Jordan, in other words, the east bank of the Jordan River.

VII. THE JEWISH COMMONWEALTH

A. There was no king or central leader over the 12 tribes. Each tribe had their own army, their own area where they lived and their own court system to dispense justice according to Jewish law.

B. This era was thus known as the period of the Judges. During this time, the Jews formed an alliance of the 12 tribes living in Israel and were ruled by judges and elders. Whenever there was an external threat, the tribes united under the leadership of one of these Judges.

C. The Judges would go from tribe to tribe and speak to the people, advise them and bring them together in times of external threat.

- Some of the Judges of the time were: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gidon, Avimelech, Yair, Samson, Jephthah...

- You've probably heard of Deborah, she and her general, Barak, decimated the armies of Sisera.

- You're probably familiar with the name Ehud (Ehud Barak is named after one of these judges in Biblical times in Israel).

- You've probably heard of Samson from the famous Samson and Delilah stories and the battle with the Philistines.

D. The entire Land of Israel was not in Jewish hands during this period.

- The city of Jerusalem was still in the hands of the Jebusites, because the Jews had not yet conquered that city.

- Certain areas on the coast, specifically the Gaza Strip, were also in the hands of the Philistines, who continuously fought with the Jewish people until the time of Samson.

E. Rocketing through about 400 years of history - the period of the Judges lasted about 400 years, during which the Judges led the Jewish people. There was significant internal strife, and some major external battles. This period is best known for the Jewish people's cycle of sinning, resulting in a Divine threat, followed by repenting and being saved by a Judge or prophet.

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SECTION V. ROME

A. In the Jewish year 3696, 64 B.C.E., Pompeii, the great Roman general, moved his armies into Israel at the invitation of the Maccabean descendants Hyrcanus and Aristobolus, brothers who were vying for the throne. Antipater, the Idumean¹ advisor of Hyrcanus, suggested that they invite Rome to mediate their quarrel for the monarchy. Thus began the centuries long influence of the Roman Empire, which had ascended above and beyond the declining Greek Empire.

B. Herod, son of Antipater, was a puppet ruler for the Romans.

- Through political machinations, Antipater was declared governor of Judea by Caesar. When Antipater was assassinated, Herod, along with his brother Phasaël, were appointed rulers of Judea. After a mild revolt against the Idumean brothers, during which Phasaël committed suicide and the last Maccabean, Antigonus, gained control, Rome invaded Judea. Antigonus was murdered, and Herod was declared King of Judea by the Roman Senate and his ally, Marc Antony.

- Herod was a tyrant who persecuted and murdered the sages, and assassinated the remaining Maccabeans. Herod attempted to legitimize his claim to the throne by marrying Mariamne, the last remaining descendant of the Maccabees. Later, in a fit of jealousy, he had her put to death.

- Herod also completed the political expansion and unification of Judea that had been started by his predecessors, the Hasmoneans. Under his rule, territories which included the Greek coastal cities, parts of southern Syria, and the Golan Heights were added to Judea.

- Not only did Herod expand the borders of the Jewish kingdom, but he also undertook a number of important building projects, the most significant being the complete renovation of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple Mount, which was the base he created for the new building, still forms the heart of Jerusalem today.

- Out of fear and paranoia, Herod also built Masada and Herodian, two great impregnable, amazing fortresses (Herodian is an artificial mountain, and Masada is built on top of a plateau in the desert near the Dead Sea). He performed incredible feats of engineering for the time that even today would be considered remarkable accomplishments.

¹ The Idumeans, or Edomites, were the descendants of Esau who lived in the land of Edom. Their territory was captured by the Maccabees and, under the rule of John Hyrcanus (c. 125 B.C.E.) the Idumeans were completely subdued and converted to Judaism. While the Idumeans submitted to conversion, they remained a separate subject of the people.

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- Herod generally aided Jews living in the Diaspora and upheld Jewish law. However, his support of Jewish law was inconsistent and because, of his ignorance, he often offended many of his Jewish subjects by such actions as capping the Temple with Roman Eagles, building a Roman stadium nearby, and attempting to curry favor with his non-Jewish (ie. pagan) subjects.

C. This was the beginning of the end for the Jewish nation.

- Herod's brutality and his obsequiousness to Rome stirred much Jewish resentment towards the Romans. From the time of his death in 4 C.E., this resentment grew steadily leading towards revolution. In 66 C.E., war broke out.

- The revolt had numerous causes, including high unemployment, general social unrest, and a succession of Roman governors who mistreated their Jewish subjects.

- Beyond reigning over the Jews with a strong hand, the Romans outrightly insulted their Jewish subjects when, in a final insult to Jewish religious and national autonomy, Caligula, the mad Emperor, ordered that a statue of himself be raised in the Temple in Jerusalem. Though it was never carried out (Caligula was assassinated), the decree illustrates how the Romans misunderstood the degree to which Jews differed from pagan peoples, for whom one more idol would not have caused much of a stir.

- The Judean's rebellion proved disastrous to the Jews, and the Romans quickly reconquered the entire region. Not only did the Romans sack Jerusalem, in 70 CE, but, Titus destroyed the Temple.

- The Second Holy Temple, which had existed for approximately 420 years, was destroyed in the Jewish year 3828, on the 9th of Av.

- The famous Arch of Titus, which still stands in Rome today, was erected after the emperor's death. Its reliefs depict the pillaging of the Temple and the Romans hauling away the sacred vessels like the Menorah.

D. One of the most famous rabbis alive at that time was Rabbi Akiva. He had, literally, thousands and thousands of students.

- Rabbi Akiva started off as a poor shepherd. In fact, according to tradition, Akiva was illiterate until 40, when his devoted wife, Rachel, encouraged him to study.²

² This is a wonderful story to expand upon if there is time.

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III. THE GOLDEN AGE OF SPAIN

A. Without a doubt, Maimonides was blessed with a brilliant mind, but he was also the product of an era -- he lived at the end of the period known as the "Golden Age of Spanish Jewry."

- Of all the Jewish centers that developed in Europe and North Africa during the Middle Ages, the most intellectually prolific and diverse communities were to be found in the Muslim al-Andalus, the area which is today southern Andalusian Spain.

- Many of these Spanish Jews, known as Sephardim from the Biblical term for Spain (Sepharad), reached positions of great power within the Muslim government.

- Among the most famous was Samuel ibn Nagrela (993-1055 C.E.), also known as 'Sh'muel ha-Nagid' (the chief). He commanded Muslim armies as a general, and was even appointed vizier (a post similar to prime minister).

- Samuel ha-Nagid is also known for his writings of halakha (Jewish law), and for his poetry, successfully combining duties to the state and to the Jewish community, contributing significantly to the intellectual flowering of the Age.

- Indeed, Sephardic Jews such as Isaac ibn Ghiyyat, Moses ibn Ezra, and Solomon ibn Gabirol are just a few of the luminaries who excelled in Biblical commentary, poetry, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and grammar. They initiated a renaissance in Hebrew literature, wrote the first Hebrew dictionary and grammar books, and composed many Hebrew prayers that are still recited today.

- One of the most famous Sephardi scholars who successfully combined secular philosophy with Judaism was Judah ha-Levi (1086-1145).

- Judah HaLevi wrote an important book called the Kuzari. In the Kuzari, he recreated the discussions between the pagan king of the Khazars (a tribe in Russia which had converted to Judaism centuries earlier) and a philosopher, a Christian, a Moslem, and a Jew. The bulk of the book is the discussion between the pagan king and the Jewish rabbi, resulting in the pagan king's conversion to Judaism. The Kuzari is a very basic book of Jewish philosophy, which is reprinted, translated and studied to this day.

B. This period of peace and prosperity came to an end in the 11th century when the cosmopolitan Muslims of al-Andalus were overthrown by fundamentalist Muslims from North Africa. The ruling dynasties that followed, those of the Almoravids and the Almohads, were marked by persecution of the Jewish and Christian minorities.

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• The persecution, however, proved to be actually advantageous, because, as a result, Jewish-Spanish culture thus spread outside Spain. While some families, such as that of the Rambam, went to Muslim Northern Africa, many Spanish Jews went to Christian Europe. The area of Provence, in the South of France, became one of the crossroads where there was a meeting and a mixing of the Sephardi, the Jewish culture from Spain and North Africa, and the Ashkenazi, the Jewish culture of France, Germany, etc.,.

•• One of the results of this confluence was that the Jewish communities of Christian Spain and Provence became famous centers for translating Arabic books into Hebrew and Latin. In fact, these centers helped transfer the secular knowledge of the ancient world (that had been maintained in Arabic) to the Christian world.

•• A vital result of that particular joining of cultures was a blossoming of Jewish learning by scholars known merely as Chachmei Provence, the wise men of Provence. Their great scholarship paved the way for The Code of Jewish Law, which became the great codifying book, the great smorgasbord of Jewish law.

-Jewish scholars began to synthesize the Jewish beliefs of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi world. One such scholar, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher took the legal traditions of Sephardi scholars like Maimonides and Nahmanides, and Ashkenazi rabbis, like his father, R. Asher ben Yehiel, combining them into a single work called the Arbaah Turim (or The Four Columns), a predecessor of the Code of Jewish Law.

• Perhaps the most stunning example of scholarship in this era was produced by Nachmanides (c. 1194-1270), Rabbi Moshe ben Nachmun, known in Hebrew by the acronym the RaMBaN. He was very well known for his commentaries on the Torah, commentaries on the Talmud, as well as for being a great mystic or Kabbalist. He was also a physician. However, he is probably best known for the Great Disputation in which he participated.

•• It was not uncommon in Europe for the Christian kings to have rabbis debate Christian scholars. Unfortunately, they placed many restrictions on the rabbis. They said: "You can not say anything which we deem insulting to Christianity. You may not say anything which may appear to say that Christianity is false. You may not say anything which may appear to say that Jesus is not the Messiah." Debating Judaism and Christianity with these restrictions is like going up against Mohamad Ali with your hands tied behind your back.

3 Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (1270-1343) was also known as the Baal HaTurim. He lived in Toledo, Spain, and wrote the Arbah Turim (The Four Columns), an early codification of Jewish law.

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FROM SECTION IV. THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

E. This was the mid-19th century when America was enmeshed in its Civil War and the Crimean War was being waged. Jews in Eastern Europe were continuing to be set upon by their brutal neighbors.

- In the late 1800's there were numerous pogroms in the Ukraine. Frequent atrocities were committed -- murder, rape, torture.

- On top of this, Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 of by a Jewish anarchist, leading to a major outbreak of anti-Semitism in Russia. This rise in anti-Semitism, however, resulted in a tremendous mass emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe.

- Unlike his father, Nicholas I, Alexander II was liberal minded and reformed many of Russia's laws. He relieved some of the oppressive edicts that affected the Jews (e.g. lifted conscription laws).

- The majority found their way to the US.

- The Eastern European Jews followed an earlier mass of German Jewish migration that took place in the 1840s and 1850s.

- During the German migration, such well-known Jews as Levi Strauss, Meyer Guggenheim, Joseph Seligman, Abraham Lehmann, etc., came to America.

- By 1903 the population of Jews in the United States was about 2 million, up from a few hundred thousand in 1881, due mainly to immigration from Eastern Europe as a result of this terrible anti-Semitism.

- England, it should be noted, had a strong Jewish population, and a largely assimilated one. One of the foremost examples of British assimilation is Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), a Prime Minister of England.

- While Benjamin Disraeli was born Jewish, his father had him baptized -- not for any deep philosophical reasons but because, apparently, he had a dispute with the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London about membership fees. In protest, the senior Disraeli didn't just go to another synagogue, he went to the church. Thus Benjamin Disraeli was brought up as a Christian. Still and all, he was a very proud Jew. Benjamin Disraeli passionately defended attacks against Judaism in Parliament. When someone said something anti-Semitic in Parliament, he responded "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the right honorable gentlemen were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in

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the temple of Solomon" He was very proud of his Jewish heritage. It was not his fault that he had been baptized and raised that way. He was an interesting hybrid - a baptized Christian who was proud of his Jewish roots.\

- Other major centers of Jewish settlement included western Europe (particularly England and Germany), Argentina, and South Africa, the latter attracting mostly Lithuanian Jews

F. While the United States was certainly not free of prejudice and anti-Semitism, Jews found, for the most part, that they could achieve great things there.

- Economically, Jews achieved significant success by transforming themselves from peddlers to shop-owners. Whereas in Europe, Jews had often been restricted from owning land or opening shops in competition with non-Jews, America was the land of the free.

- Lazarus Straus began peddling in Georgia and saved enough money to bring his family from Bavaria. With the help of his three sons, his business blossomed in to R.H. Macy's in New York and Abraham & Straus in Brooklyn.

- Julius Rosenwald took mail-order business to a new level when he developed Sears Roebuck & Co.

- When Levi Straus peddled during the California gold rush, someone paid him for his wares with a load of canvas tenting cloth. Ingeniously, he had the material made into pants and the first pair of Levi's trousers hit the markets.

- Jews were also able to participate in law and government equally with their non-Jewish peers.

- Judah P. Benjamin was a U.S. senator from the state of Louisiana until the outbreak of the Civil War. He then became Secretary of State of the Confederacy (ok, so he chose the wrong side)!

- Louis Brandeis (1856-1941) was the first Jew appointed to the United States Supreme Court. He was appointed in 1917 and served until 1939. Brandeis was also an ardent Zionist and a man who was passionate about Jews remaining Jewish.

G. With the vast freedoms of America, the Reform movement found ripe ground for growth. Many of the Jews who came to the United States felt as if they were starting afresh. When they came to America, they said: "This is it, The Goldena Medina, the golden country, a new opportunity!! All that old world stuff, the tfillin and the tzitzis and the piety, Shabbat and kashrut...had to stop. However, they didn't want to reject Judaism totally, so the perfect thing for them was a new, liberal form of Judaism to match their new country.

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FROM SECTION IV. REBIRTH

C. After the Second World War, the United States, now a major world player, adopted the policy of economically rebuilding Europe, because Europe was needed to serve as a bulwark against Communism.

- As mentioned earlier, many Jews had joined Communist or Socialist organizations. Some stayed active members, while others went on with their lives. No matter how their lives developed, their association with Communism would come to haunt them when Senator Joseph McCarthy began his domestic "Red Scare" in 1950.

- During the McCarthy Era, anyone who had even a brief association with the Communists was questioned. They were asked to name names so that the government could root-out what they believed was a fifth column.

- Those who were called to the Senate hearings and did not share their information, or who were even implicated (though not convicted), were "black-listed." This became the fate of many famous figures in the arts, particularly in the blossoming movie industry. Many of the blacklisted artists were Jews.

D. Revolutionary Religion in America

- Traditional Judaism

- In the United States, a silent revolution was taking place among the Orthodox about which, probably, most American Jews have no idea. This revolution insured the continuation of Torah study after the great destruction in Europe:

-Rabbi Aharon Kotler (1892-1962), a great Talmudic sage from Europe, came to the United States and went to a little farming community in New Jersey called Lakewood. Anyone heard of Lakewood, NJ? Rabbi Kotler established a traditional European Yeshiva, house of study, which today has approximately 4,000 full-time students and has produced thousands of rabbis and scholars, and satellite yeshivas, all over the United States, and in many other countries.

- The changing role of women - Before tackling this challenging topic, NJOP wishes to state that, especially with subjects of more recent vintage, ideas are likely to be controversial. Readers and leaders may disagree with what is presented, or may feel that important issues and elements have been left out. This is an overview, and anyone who is interested in obtaining more information is welcome to contact NJOP for reference help.

- From a traditional historic perspective, the role of the Jewish woman has always been considered complementary to the

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man's role. His "ying" to her "yang," her butter for his bread...however you want to conceive of it. Men and women represent a partnership - The traditional view is that man is meant to be a more outward, public creature and woman a more private, inward creature. Therefore, man "goes out to work" and woman "stays in to work."

-But Jews have lived in subcultures within vastly larger cultures for so long that we cannot help but be influenced. Thus there were times when Jewish women were mistreated, but these behaviors were more reflections of the outer society, during the darker days in history when sexism was the norm.

•• In the 1960s and '70s the world underwent significant philosophical changes on...well, on just about everything. Feminism, the movement for women's equality with men, had a definite and far reaching impact on American Judaism.

-Reform Movement--As far back as 1846, at the Breslau Conference in Germany, Reform decided to equate men and women with the same religious obligations. Thus women were counted in the minyan (prayer quorum of 10), women and men studied from the same books, and seating was mixed.

-While way back in 1921, Hebrew Union College already acknowledged that there was technically no issue with ordaining a woman rabbi, the first ordination of a woman did not occur until 1972.

- As you may recall, the Reconstructionist movement started off with a "feminist bang" when it held the first Bat Mitzvah ever in 1922. However, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College did not ordain a woman until 1974.

-The Conservative movement, which tended to stay closer to traditional Jewish practice, hesitated on joining in the movement to ordain women. Their ranks were deeply divided on the issue. In 1983, however, they voted to allow women into the actual seminary and ordained the first female Conservative rabbi in 1985.

-The Orthodox were not impervious to the demand for a larger role for women in public Jewish life. While there was some debate on the possibility of women receiving ordination, the traditional view point has prevailed. There has, however, been an immense increase in women's learning and in women taking more prominent roles in community life itself.

JEWISH HISTORY TIMELINE

Lesson III: The Jewish Epicenter Moves West

Jewish Year	Civil Date	Jewish Events	World Events
4773	1013 C.E.	Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (aka RIF) of Morocco creates first condensation and codification of Jewish Law • R. Zerachiah Halevi writes critique of code	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;"> <p>(א) בראשית אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל את התורה אלא מחדש בזכ לכם שהיא מלוא ראשונה שנלטו בה ישראל</p> <p>(1) In the beginning, said Rabbi Yitzhak, "It wasn't necessary to start the Torah other than from</p> <p>Rashi's Commentary Genesis 11</p> </div>
4800	1040 C.E.	Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (aka RaSHI) writes commentaries on virtual all classic texts with systematic grammar, translations, elucidation of verses based on Midrash	
	1092 C.E.	Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra writes commentaries in Spain, also fights Karaite movement using logic & grammar	
4856	1096 C.E.	Start of First Crusade (9th of Av) resulting in widespread slaughter of Jewish communities in the Rhineland • Godfrey de Boullion, leader of a Crusade, says "Kill the heretics amongst us before going to Holy Land!"	Crusades
4859	1099 C.E.	Jerusalem captured by the Crusaders, all Jews in city killed	
4895	1135 C.E.	R. Moses ben Maimon (aka Maimonides/Rambam) writes Guide for the Perplexed, Mishna Torah, Book of the Commandments, 13 Principles of Faith, Commentary, Letters, Medical writings • Controversy develops around Rambam and use of secular philosophy	Saladin leads Moslems in fight against Crusaders
4906		Expulsion from parts of Germany • First accusations of desecrating "host" and blood libels • Rabeinu Yaakov Tam and the Baalei HaTosfot (France & Germany) become central forces of Torah scholarship	
4906	1146 C.E.	Second Crusade begins, more Jews killed as Crusaders head to Israel	Second Crusade
4909	1149 C.E.	Almohades bring Islamic intolerance to Spain, fostering the spread of Spanish-Jewish culture outside the borders of Spain, particularly in Provence, at the crossroads of Sefarad and Ashkenaz	
4910	1150-1217 C.E.	Era of the Pietists of Germany	Lateran Council orders Jews to wear Badge of "Shame"
4920	1160 C.E.	Benjamin of Tudela, travels throughout world and writes Travels of Benjamin	
4946	1186 C.E.	Jews expelled from France	
4948	1187 C.E.	Saladin conquers Jerusalem and allows Jews into the city	
4949	1189 C.E.	Third Crusade, widespread massacres of Jews in England	Richard the Lion Hearted

*Events listed did not necessarily happen at the year listed, rather on or in-between that date and the next.