THE CRUEL JEWISH FATHER: FROM MIRACLE TO MURDER

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Robert Chazan has spent much of his career studying Jewish martyrdom, asking who was martyred during the Crusades, why, and detailing the martyrlogical ideal that grew out of these events, as well as he has probed the significance of kiddush ha-shem, both for the victims and those who memorialized them. In homage to these achievements, I would like to further the examination initiated by Mary Minty into Christian perceptions of the martyrdom of Jewish children at the hands of their parents. What myths were created about this terrible act in the aftermath of the Crusades, and how did these myths affect thinking and action as much as six centuries later? In particular, what was their impact on the case of Shimon Abeles in 1694, which Elisheva Carlebach has meticulously analyzed, and why was this impact so great just then?1

Answering these questions requires traversing a complex path from the twelfth through the eighteenth century. The central issues are the same throughout; the nuances are not. Those issues, whose constant undercurrent is ritual murder, are martyrdom, the Eucharist, the protection of corpus Christi (defined as the body of the faithful), and the validation of Christian (and eventually Catholic) truth. Moreover, they were “international,” occupying Catholic thinkers in all lands. Ideas travelled from England to Spain, Rome, Prague, and even Lima, Peru, in the Middle Ages, but especially in the time of the highly centralized post-Tridentine Church.2

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Medieval Martyrdom As Eucharistic

We begin with the harsh reaction to the deaths of Jewish children at their parents’ hands during the Crusades, most notably that of the twelfth-century Rupert of Deutz. Rupert was troubled because these children, he believed, were no longer Jews. They were Christians, baptized in the mayhem (something the Hebrew chronicles refrain from admitting), just as were the Holy Innocents purportedly slaughtered by Herod “by (or in) their own blood”—a form of baptism characterized by Durandus of St. Pourcain in the thirteenth century as the fruit of “divine generosity.” These children, as Rupert saw them, were Christian martyrs, and as all such martyrs, they were deemed Eucharistic. Ignatius, martyred in the second century, imagined himself metamorphosed into “the bread of Christ,” and in the sixteenth century Edmund Campion called martyrs “holy hosts and oblations.” What Rupert thus imagined as he saw (or heard about) Jews killing their (baptized or virtually baptized) children was Jews attacking the Host. This critical nexus, the true heart of the issue, has remained virtually unexplored.

A second, equally neglected element is the saving role of the Virgin in stories of Jewish malfeasance, whose presence ensures that Jewish intentions remain unrealized. Marian elements are being increasingly identified with tales that led to the diffusion of accusations of ritual murder. The collections of these legends that spread throughout

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4 See Minty, “Kidush ha-shem.”

5 Kenneth Stow, Jewish Dogs, An Image and Its Interpreters (Stanford, 2006), p. 24, points to Cyprian and others who link martyrdom, and martyrs themselves, with the Eucharist.
