As a rule, Medieval Jews in Christendom had no knowledge of Latin, the literary language of the majority, nor were they familiar with texts written in that language. Generally, they could function adequately with the use of vernacular for social and business contacts and with Hebrew for religious and cultural needs. But when Jewish sages perceived a need to learn Latin, they did so. As Gad Freudenthal has demonstrated, because knowledge of Latin was particularly acute for maintaining medical proficiency, Latin medical treatises were often translated into Hebrew. Likewise, the Jewish-Christian debate was a major stimulus for inter-religious contacts and Jewish acquisition of proficiency in Latin. This article will examine these polemics as an incentive for Jews to study Latin and then turn to the specific use of the Latin language in medieval Jewish polemical treatises.

In the course of the Paris Disputation of 1240, the Christian interlocutor, the former Jew Nicholas Donin, cited a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56b–57a. According to that passage, Jesus was condemned in the afterlife to be immersed in boiling excrement. The author of the Hebrew account of the disputation informs us that this particular passage was introduced into the debate in the vernacular, in order to embarrass the Jews in front of Queen-Mother Blanche, who presided over the event, and who, presumably, would not have understood the passage had it been presented in Latin. If the author of the Hebrew account makes the point that this

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1 Jewish use of the French vernacular in the Middle Ages is discussed by Kirsten Fudeman, *Vernacular Voices. Language and Identity in Medieval French Jewish Communities* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).


3 Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial* (Rutherford/Madison/Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), p. 156. The Hebrew text states that the use of the vernacular was in
talmudic passage was read out in French, we have to assume that the other rabbinic citations were quoted in Latin, the language in which they appear in the thirty-five writs of particulars in Donin's indictment of the Talmud.  

Does this mean that Rabbi Jeḥiel ben Joseph of Paris, the main Jewish representative, debated with Donin in Latin as well? We cannot be sure how well Rabbi Jeḥiel and his colleagues, Judah ben David of Melun, Moses of Coucy, and Samuel ben Solomon, knew Latin (in addition to their knowledge of the vernacular). Perhaps Joseph ben Nathan Official, the assumed recorder of the Hebrew account of the disputation, who uses a fair amount of Latin in his own anti-Christian polemic, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, was recruited to help the Jewish side understand the Latin. Given the limited sources at our disposal, we have no way of ascertaining the language(s) in which the

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order *le-havʾišreiḥenu*, “make us loathsome/offensive” (after Exod. 5:21); literally, “to make us [the Jews] smell bad” (an appropriate metaphor in light of the talmudic statement about excrement). Maccoby renders it: “This is in order to make us Christians stink.” Similarly, Alexandra Cuffel (*Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007], p. 137) writes that Donin states that the upshot of the imputed punishment (which, according to Cuffel’s misreading, also includes Jesus’ followers) was “to make us [Christians] stink.” Irven M. Resnick (*Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages*, [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012], p. 235) offers a similar translation. These authors misconstrue the sense of the text.

4 The Latin text of the thirty-five articles is provided by Isidore Loeb (“La Controverse de 1240 sur le Talmud,” *Revue des Études Juives* 2 [1881]: 253–270; 3 [1881]: 39–55), followed by the Latin “confessions” of rabbis Jeḥiel of Paris and Judah ben David of Melun. The confessions are also found in Chen Merchavia, *The Church versus Talmudic and Midrashic Literature [500–1248]* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970), pp. 453–455 (Heb.); and, translated into English, in Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, pp. 164–167. Referring to the same passage about the boiling excrement, Merchavia concludes that the Disputation must have been conducted in Latin; see Merchavia, *Church versus Talmud*, p. 245.
