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Space and Place in Medieval Ashkenaz: An Everyday Perspective*

Abstract: This article provides the theoretical and contextual background for *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21 nos. 3 and 4 (2021). It situates the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz within their homes and discusses their attachment to and identification with the places where they lived. It surveys approaches to space as used by scholars seeking to understand medieval life and outlines the relevance of these theories to the study of everyday life. Situating the Jews within this area of studies, the article focuses on the tensions and affiliations Jews had within the surrounding Christian space and challenges some of the previous approaches towards these issues. Against this backdrop, the goals of the articles are explained and surveyed, moving from the home to the general environs of medieval towns and cities.

Key words: Medieval Ashkenaz, social history, everyday life, Jewish-Christian relations, space.

Introduction

And if there is a convert and the leaders of the community and the rabbis in the city know he would gladly return to Judaism, but if he were to escape, it would place the Jews of that city in danger because they would be blamed for helping him escape, he can trick the gentiles and say he wishes to go on pilgrimage to the tomb, and he should take up the cross until he is out of the vicinity where he is known and then remove the cross and the Jews will not be blamed.

This passage in *Sefer Hasidim*, a collection of 13th-century moral exempla and exegesis, discusses the plight of a Jew who converted to Christianity but then regretted this decision.¹ As told there, the community leaders were

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1 Judah b. Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Judah Wistenetski (Frankfurt: Wahrmann, 1924) #201. This edition is based on MS Parma H3280. For a comparison between manuscripts and versions, see https://etc.princeton.edu/sefer_hasidim. *Sefer Hasidim* is attributed primarily to Judah b. Samuel he-Hasid of Regensburg, who died in the early