

Timely Negotiations

On Jewish Time and Christian Time in
Medieval Ashkenaz

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A Jew should not say to a non-Jew, "until the day of the idolatrous holiday" or "until a certain saint's day." Rather, he should say "so many weeks," as it is written: "Make no mention of the names of other gods; they shall not be heard on your lips" (Ex. 23:13), and it is written: "And no more will you call Me Ba'ali. For I will remove the names of the Ba'alim from her mouth, and they shall nevermore be mentioned by name" (Hos. 2: 18-19). And even the names of their holidays that are called [by the name of a saint, like Michael], a Jew should not mention them, nor should he say to a non-Jew, "[make an oath] on your belief in your God," and he should not say to him "on your Christianity."¹

Judah son of Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, early thirteenth century, Germany

¹ Judah son of Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Judah Wistenetzki (Frankfurt am Main: Wahrmann, 1924), §1348.

This source from the early thirteenth century deals with the confirmation of business arrangements between Jewish and Christian partners. Its author, R. Judah son of Samuel he-Hasid (the Pious) of Regensburg (d. 1217), instructs his readers to avoid terms used in everyday medieval business practice. As is often the case, the behavior prohibited by the authority is quite normative.

Medieval life in Christian lands, especially in urban centers, was organized according to the Christian calendar. Church bells announced the time of prayer at different churches, those of religious chapters and orders as well as the local parishes and, in cases of larger cities, cathedrals. The bells punctuated the days, weeks, and months in correspondence with Christian holidays.² Jews living in urban spaces were familiar with these schedules and their meanings, just as they recognized the preparations for different festivities in the cityscape and understood their implications. Scholarship has amply demonstrated that time in medieval Europe was Christian time. But how did Jews organize their communal time within Christian time? How much did they know about the values that Christian time embodied?

The source above indicates that Christian holidays served as markers of the financial calendar for Jews and Christians alike. Servants were hired all year round, but their contracts were often renewed on Feb. 2, when the Purification of the Virgin Mary was celebrated. Some texts tell us that Christians who worked for Jews expected bonuses around this time, perhaps reflecting its coincidence with the holiday of Purim.³ Beyond specific days in the calendar year, the fiscal year was split into four periods of thirteen weeks. The winter period spanned from Christmas to the Feast of Annunciation, also known as "Lady's Day;" the spring, from Annunciation to St. John the Baptist's Day; the summer, from St. John the Baptist's Day to Michaelmas; and the fall, from Michaelmas to Christmas. These days, which corresponded roughly to the equinoxes and solstices, had accompanying religious and civic rituals, and were the standard times for repaying loans and extending contracts. For Jews who were active in the local and regional economies, such days, like those of the fairs that were organized at set times of the year and associated with specific saints, impacted their everyday affairs.

The second part of the source refers to a related common practice: the making of commitments, whether in a formal court setting or informally, between individuals. Here, we read of the custom to undertake an obligation either by uttering an oath or by making a declaration using the name of God or a saint. The text above quotes an accepted formula, "on your Christianity," indicating one of the ways in which Jews and Christians made promises to each other.

What did it mean for Jews to be so deeply immersed in Christian time? How did they approach the continuous stream of Christian practices and symbols that they encountered in their everyday lives? Christian calendars in Hebrew manuscripts give us a glimpse of the complexity of their attitudes. Such calendars, like the one below (fig. 1), have been found in over a dozen medieval Hebrew manuscripts.⁴

2 Paul Perdrizet, *Le calendrier Parisien a la fin du moyen âge: D'après le breviaire et les livres d'heures* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1933); Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers, 1240-1570* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); For a Jewish perspective on this matter: Elisheva Carlebach, *Palaces of Time: Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 115–60.

3 Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 131–32.

4 Sacha Stern, "Christian Calendars in Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts," *Medieval Encounters* 22 (2016): 236–65; Justine Isserles and C. Philipp E. Nothaft, "Calendars Beyond Borders: Exchange of Calendrical Knowledge Between Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe (12th-15th Century)," *Medieval Encounters* 20 (2014): 1–37; Elisheva Baumgarten, "Shared and Contested Time: Jews and the Christian Ritual Calendar in the Late Thirteenth Century," *Viator* 46 (2015): 253–76.

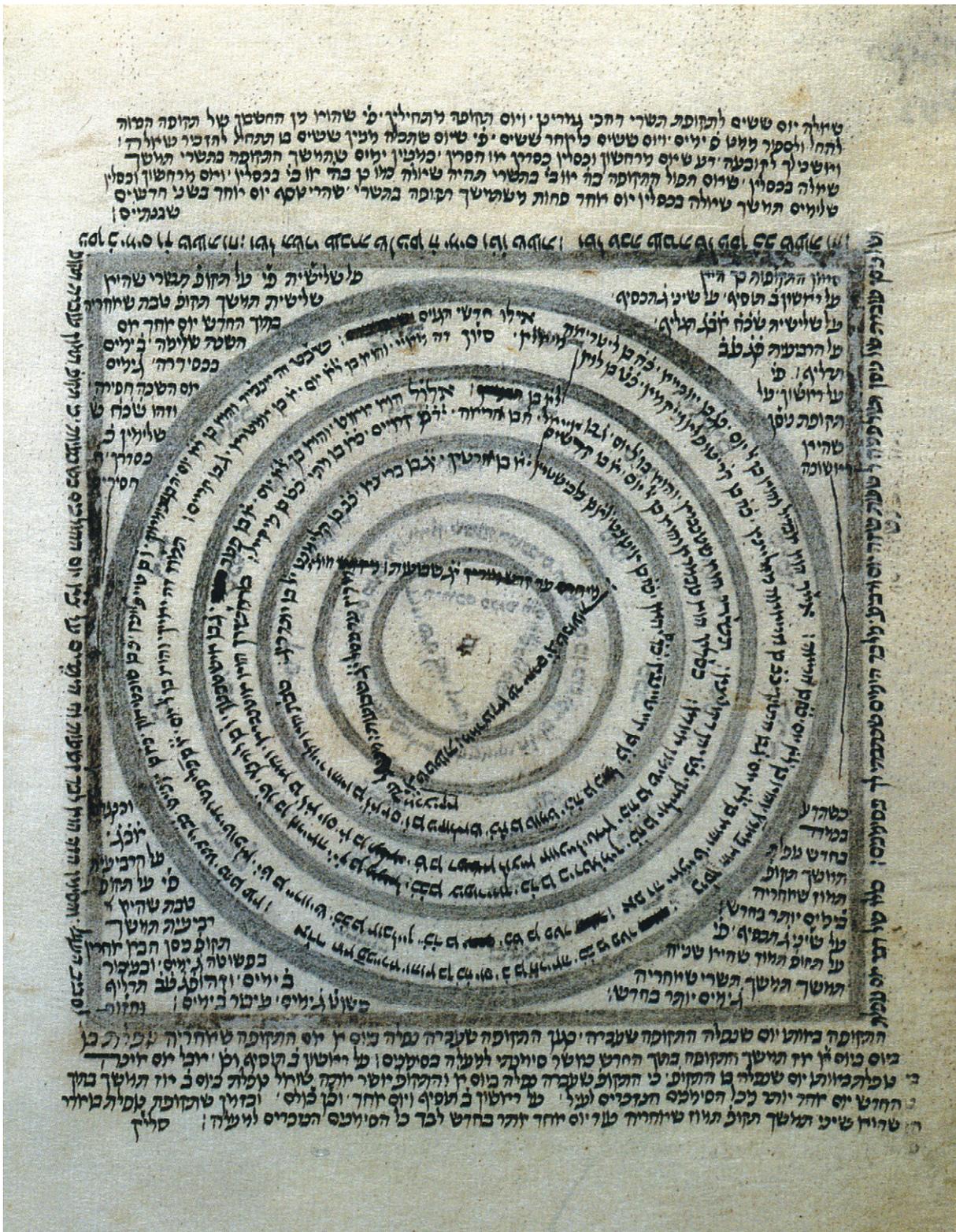


Fig. 1. North French Miscellany © The British Library Board, MS Add. 11639, fol. 542v.

This illuminated calendar, produced in Paris during the last third of the thirteenth century, appears at the end of a miscellany that includes a prayer book, the Pentateuch and other weekly readings, and piyyutim, as well as exegesis, standard forms for business and personal

interactions (marriage contracts and divorce), and more.⁵ Among such material is calendric information that relates only to the Hebrew calendar and this Christian calendar. Our calendar begins: "These are the holidays of the gentiles and their abominations: Shevat is January, and it has thirty-one days." It goes on to enumerate important saints' days, some of them more general and others specific to its vicinity, in this case, Paris.

This calendar draws our attention in two important ways. The first is that saints' days are identified by name alone. No information is provided about activities that take place on the day or about market locations. Apparently, a Jew was expected to know what happened and where on St. Agnes' Day (Jan. 21) and St. Vincent's Day (Jan. 22). Each of these days had accompanying customs, be they fasting or feasting, which had repercussions for business. Moreover, some saints' days were code for specific economic opportunities. The famous medieval fairs of Champagne, which took place for six weeks six times a year and which made Champagne central in the medieval northern French economy, were timed to coincide with the saints' days. For example, two fairs took place in Troyes. The summer fair (known as the "hot" fair) began on the Tuesday following the Feast of St. John the Baptist, and the winter fair began the day following All Saints Day (Nov. 2). The scribe who wrote down these dates assumed that the calendar user would know what took place and where.

Alongside this element of familiarity, there is a second significant feature in this calendar. The triangle in the center of this folio of the manuscript documents the four quarters of the fiscal year, the basis for loans and other agreements. It reads:

From *Nittel* (Christmas) to *Marcheque* (Annunciation) 13
weeks, from *Marcheque* to *Yohram* (St. John the Baptist Day)
13 weeks, from *Yohram* to St. Maurice Day 13 weeks, from St.
Maurice Day to *Nittel* 13 weeks.

This part of the calendar is highly illuminating. From it, we learn something about the "internal speak" of medieval Jews. Mary is referred to as *Haria* (literally, feces); the feast of St. John the Baptist is called *Yohram* (based on Ex. 22:19 and the association between the word John and the word *Yohram*, meaning "will be banned"), Peter's name is written as Peter *hamor* (Peter the ass), and St. Simon is called *Tzimaon* (thirst). Such naming clearly conveyed a profound Jewish contempt for Christian sanctity. The calendar even begins with the statement "these are the holidays of the gentiles and their abominations."⁶ None of this escaped the early modern censors, who blacked out these words in the manuscript.

As we can see from our two sources, we are dealing with a complex reality. Jews lived in Christian space and functioned in Christian time. At the same time, tensions between Jews and Christians and theological differences were ubiquitous in medieval culture. Both elements were part of daily life, and both were ingrained in daily practice. This is evident in a second calendar, written for internal Jewish practices (fig. 2).

5 A facsimile edition was published with a companion volume of articles on the manuscript, *Companion Volume to Edited Manuscript from Thirteenth Century France in Facsimile*, ed. Jeremy Schonfield (London: Facsimile Editions, 2003).

6 On Jewish practices of referring to Christian sacrality by a variety of pejoratives and invectives, see Yaacov Deutsch, "Jewish Anti-Christian Invectives and Christian Awareness: An Unstudied Form of Interaction in the Early Modern Period," *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 55 (2010): 41–61.

The top of this folio details the occurrence of the *tekufah* and is entitled "*Tekufah*, on what day and from what hour." It shows the "cycle" of solstices and equinoxes using the Hebrew calendar. The middle part of the folio contains an alternative list attributed to a twelfth-century northern French rabbi, R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, from Orléans. This list reveals the deep immersion of medieval Jews within Christian time. The occurrence of each *tekufah* here uses non-Jewish dates, that is, Christian holidays and saints' days. The entanglement of Jewish and Christian time is evident in every line of this list. The author writes:

The *tekufah* of Tishrei is the 24 of September, at 9 hours on the eve of Soleine; the *tekufah* of Tevet is the 24 of December, at 4 hours on Christmas (*Nittel*) eve; the *tekufah* of Nissan is the eve of the 26 of December, at the end (*motza'ei*) of Annunciation (*Marcheque*); the *tekufah* of Tamuz is the 25 of June, at ten and a half hours, the day after St. John the Baptist's Day (*Yohoram*).

Here, the different calendars merge into one – in the service of Jewish practice.

Returning to our opening passage from *Sefer Hasidim*, R. Judah was probably expressing more of a hope than a halakhic ruling. Medieval Jews lived within Christian urban culture, and their everyday lives were structured by Christian framings of time. Nonetheless, Jews used internal codes to assert their difference from the surrounding Christianity and their aversion to Christian sanctity. This religious difference asserted itself in the context of everyday interactions. Although R. Judah advises his readers not to accept oaths made by Christians using saints' names or even in the name of Christianity itself, this too was business as usual. Encoded within these practices was thus both a shared culture and a declaration of difference.

Further Reading

- ❖ Elisheva Baumgarten, "Shared and Contested Time: Jews and the Christian Ritual Calendar in the Late Thirteenth Century," *Viator* 46 (2015): 253–76.
- ❖ Elisheva Carlebach, *Palaces of Time: Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.
- ❖ Justine Isserles and C. Philipp E. Nothaft, "Calendars Beyond Borders: Exchange of Calendrical Knowledge Between Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe (12-15 Century)," *Medieval Encounters* 20 (2014): 1–37.
- ❖ Sacha Stern, "Christian Calendars in Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts," *Medieval Encounters* 22 (2016): 236–65.