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Jewish Emancipation Reconsidered

The French and German Models

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MICHAEL BRENNER

Introduction

Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac, better known as Rashi, was a wanderer between different worlds. Born in Troyes in 1040, he studied in Worms and Mainz, the centres of medieval German Jewish learning, before moving back to the valley of the Seine. Rashi's Bible and Talmud commentaries have served as the basis for rabbinical interpretations up to our own day. His writings were known not only to the Jewish world, however. Through Nicholas of Lyra they reached Martin Luther and thus influenced Protestant thought during the German Reformation. On a different level, contemporary scholars of the French language rely on Rashi's writings, which used numerous vernacular expressions in Hebrew transcription, as an important source for learning about the pronunciation of medieval French.

In the Middle Ages, neither France nor Germany were well-defined national entities, and medieval Ashkenaz encompassed a Jewish community stretching from the western parts of the Holy Roman Empire to the northern regions of France, thus defying any "national" definition. After the successive expulsions of the Jews from France in the fourteenth century, which were motivated by economic greed, religious fanaticism and the desire of the French monarchs to create a greater sense of national unity, only isolated pockets of Jewish settlement survived. Jews continued to live in the papal enclaves around Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin, and beginning in the sixteenth century New Christians from the Iberian peninsula, who subsequently returned to Judaism, began to settle in the southern port cities of Bordeaux and Bayonne. In the Holy Roman Empire, by contrast, with its hundreds of principalities and independent cities, there was never a complete expulsion of Jews, despite numerous local expulsions. As a result of the severely diminished size of the Jewish communities in France after 1394, as well as their relative isolation, relations between French and German Jewish communities remained insignificant for almost three centuries.

The renewal of relations between French and German Jews in the seventeenth century was the direct outcome of the redrawing of the European map in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War. After the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the territories of Alsace and Lorraine increasingly came under French sovereignty, which meant that France again became home to a large Ashkenazi Jewish community. Culturally these Jews were indistinguishable from other southwestern German Jewries, and for most of the eighteenth century they shared a common language – Yiddish – and common religious customs and traditions. It was only in the after-