

PROGRAM FIVE:

SEARCH FOR DELIVERANCE

(1492 - 1789)

HERITAGE:
CIVILIZATION AND THE JEWS

When the dreadful news [of the decree expelling Jews from Spain] reached the people, they [...] wept bitterly. [...] However, they bravely encouraged each other: "Let us cling unflinchingly to our faith [...] If they let us live, we will live, if they kill us, we will perish. But we will not break our Divine Covenant nor shall we turn back. We will go forth in the name of the Lord our God."

In this spirit the people, old and young, women and children [...] went forth on one day, unarmed and afoot. I was among them. They went whithersoever the wind carried them. Some fled to the kingdom of Portugal, others to the kingdom of Navarre. Many chose the way of the sea and were lost, drowned, burnt to death, and sold into slavery.

—Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437-1509), *Memoir*, from Leo W.

Schwarz, *Memoirs of My People Through a Thousand Years* (New York, Toronto: Farrar and Rinehart, 1943)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The expulsion of the Jews from Spain, on one hand, and the French Revolution, on the other, bracketed three centuries of major political, cultural, and social upheavals. To survey the changes in this era, both for Jewry and civilization as a whole, is to present a catalogue of advances, transformations, and reversals.

The Renaissance, which started in Italy, was based on a revival of classical art, literature, and learning. Its humanist philosophy emphasized reason and inquiry over faith and authority and valued everyday, human experience. In the German city of Mainz in around 1450, Gutenberg invented movable type. This technological advance enabled the mass production of books, making knowledge more accessible than ever before. In the 16th century, Copernicus discovered that the earth revolved around the sun—and modern science was born. Scientific achievements reduced the hazards of ocean travel, allowing Europeans to explore distant parts of the globe. Motivated by the desire for increased international trade, Portugal, Spain, Holland, France, and England established colonial empires in the Americas and Asia.

In Germany in 1517, Martin Luther initiated the Reformation, which challenged the authority of the Pope, questioned the ritual of the Church, and ultimately, split Christendom into Protestant and Catholic sectors. In the next generation, Catholic leaders such as Ignatius Loyola launched the Counter-Reformation to reaffirm the supremacy of the Papacy and the authority of the Church.

For Jews, the end of the 15th century was marked by tragedy. In 1492, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand expelled the entire Jewish population of Spain in an attempt to isolate *conversos* (Christian converts) from contact with non-Christians. Eventually, many of the exiles found new homes in

North Africa, Italy, the Netherlands, the Americas, and the Ottoman Empire (which at that time included Palestine). In the 14th and 15th centuries, large numbers of Ashkenazic Jews from Northern Europe migrated to Poland and Lithuania.

Rabbinical scholarship achieved new heights in Salonika, Cairo, Constantinople, and Safed, which was the home of a spiritual revival centered on *kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism. In Renaissance Italy, Jewish and Christian philosophers traded ideas. Jewish philosophy began to reflect a humanist influence. Christian philosophers learned about Judaism and developed a new appreciation for the role of Hebrew culture in the formation of Western civilization.

Religious and social schism, as well as continuing persecution, rocked Jewish society. In the 17th century, in the course of a bloody uprising, thousands of Jews in Poland and Ukraine were murdered by Bogdan Chmielnicki's Cossacks. In Amsterdam, Baruch Spinoza argued for the supremacy of rationalism over religious doctrine. His controversial views led to his excommunication from the Jewish community. During the same

century, thousands of Jews around the world became followers of Shabbetai Zevi, a charismatic but erratic messianic pretender. In the mid-18th century, Hasidism, a dynamic religious movement that emphasized joyous prayer over asceticism and scholarship, arose in Poland to challenge the Jewish communal establishment. Hasidism was particularly popular among poor Jews and



Shabbetai Zevi, False Messiah

quickly spread to other Eastern European regions.

In the 18th century, French philosophers, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, led an intellectual revolution known as the Enlightenment, which questioned traditional royal and Church authority by suggesting that human institutions should conform to new canons of logic and reason. The "enlightened" also argued for the equality of man and universal liberty. These ideas spread throughout Europe and even to the American colonies. In Berlin in the 1770s, a small group of Jews gathered around Moses Mendelssohn, a Jewish philosopher of the German Enlightenment, who sought to apply the ideals of the Enlightenment to Judaism. Adherents of the Jewish

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Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) aimed for the integration of Jews into European society and for a synthesis of Jewish tradition and Western culture. With the approach of the 19th century, the ideas of the *Haskalah* gained currency with a new generation of Jews, who were faced with new challenges and opportunities not encountered by their parents and grandparents.

ACTIVITIES

MAP

JEWISH MIGRATIONS IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD, 1492-1700

In this unit, ask your students to show on the class wall map the routes that Jews took in their dispersion after the expulsion from Spain in 1492.

PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Go over this exercise with the class. Below are the correct answers:

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Safed | 7. Bogdan Chmielnicki |
| 2. Zohar | 8. Shabbetai Zevi |
| 3. <i>kabbalah</i> | 9. Ba'al Shem Tov |
| 4. ghetto | 10. Court Jews |
| 5. New Jerusalem | 11. Moses Mendelssohn |
| 6. Baruch Spinoza | 12. <i>Haskalah</i> |

THE HASIDIC WAY

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, believed that devotion to learning and study was not the only way of living a pious Jewish life. Instead, joyful faith and allegiance to a rebbe (spiritual leader) could provide even the humblest with a pathway to God. The Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings appealed to the poor, who were unable to afford prolonged yeshiva study and who appreciated the egalitarianism of Hasidic life.

Here is one selection from the vast body of Hasidic literature. Read it to the class to help convey some of the essence of Hasidism.

JOY

Once a Jew in great sorrow came to the Ba'al Shem Tov. "How many days," he asked, "do I have to fast, so as to atone for a grievous sin?" The Ba'al Shem Tov replied: "Not through fasting is God's anger averted, but through joy. Recite the Psalms, with inward rejoicing, and you will be free of your sin."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What Hasidic belief is extolled in this reading?
2. How do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam regard fasting?

USING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

THE CHMIELNICKI (KHMYEL-NITS-KI) MASSACRES (1648-1655)

There had been Jews in Poland and neighboring lands as far back as the 10th century. By the middle of the 17th century, they numbered about half a million. During this period, they enjoyed prosperity and tolerance, and brought Jewish learning to new heights in the many yeshivas they established. The Jews, as financial agents of the crown and landed gentry, were given special privileges. They constituted a much-needed middle class of tradesmen and craftsmen. However, they also served as economic middlemen, and were a buffer, as it were, between the wealthy Polish landlords and the impoverished peasantry. The resentments of this unequal society erupted into a bloody revolt in 1648. Ukrainian Cossacks led by Chmielnicki massacred tens of thousands of Jews and Poles and sold others into slavery.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read with the class Nathan of Hanover's description of the Chmielnicki massacres. (See Student Worksheet.) Ask students to deduce Nathan's purpose in writing it. To whom was he addressing his book?
2. Ask the class to identify two kinds of atrocities described here—those against people and those against books. Which is worse? Why?
3. Have students write a news article about the massacres, complete with headline. Be sure that they include the who, what, where, when, and why of the event. Some students may wish to do further research on this topic.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

- Believe it or not, small communities of Marranos (secret Jews) have recently been discovered in Portugal, and there is evidence that some families in the American Southwest have retained Marrano practices. Write a research report on present-day Marranos, using recent and archived newspaper articles and other published works. Try also to obtain and watch Frederic Brenner's 1990 documentary, *The Last Marranos*.
- Write a research report on one of the following communities settled by Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal: Salonika, Constantinople, Venice, Amsterdam, or Safed. What were this community's cultural and economic achievements? How was society there shaped by the traumatic experiences of the refugees?
- Discuss Jewish contributions to the Italian Renaissance. How did the exchange of ideas affect both Jewish and Christian thought?



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PREVIEW QUESTIONS

Answer these questions as you watch *Search for Deliverance* or as you explore the accompanying multimedia presentations, historical documents, and maps.

1. Why was the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 a tragedy? How did it affect Jews everywhere?
2. Where and why did ghettos originate in Europe?
3. What contribution did Jews make to the Italian Renaissance?
4. How did the thriving Jewish community of Poland meet with disaster in 1648?
5. How did the appearance and failure of Shabbetai Zevi as a false messiah affect Jews the world over? Why were so many Jews ready to believe in him?
6. Describe the beliefs and life-styles of the early Hasidim.
7. What were some of Moses Mendelssohn's ideas about Jews and European society?

PEOPLE AND PLACES AND TERMS

Read this list of names, places, and terms before viewing *Search for Deliverance*:

Baruch Spinoza	Safed	Ba'al Shem Tov
Haskalah	Bogdan Chmielnicki	Shabbetai Zevi
Court Jews	Moses Mendelssohn	New Jerusalem
ghetto	Zohar	kabbalah

Immediately afterwards, insert the correct item in each blank space in the following summary:

Thousands of displaced Spanish Jews fled to the small town of (1) _____ in Palestine, where they studied the (2) _____, a book based on a body of mystical Jewish ideas known as the (3) _____. In Europe, Jews experienced both tolerance and oppression. In Venice, Jews were forced to live in a (4) _____, a word that originally meant iron foundry. On the other hand, Amsterdam was so liberal towards Jews that it was soon known as (5) _____. A Jewish philosopher there, (6) _____, questioned the truth of miracles and was excommunicated by the Jewish authorities. The Polish Jewish community became the largest in the world, but in 1648 a Ukrainian Cossack chieftain, (7) _____, led a bloody rebellion against Poland in which over 100,000 Jews were tortured, killed, or enslaved.

Over the centuries, some Jews responded to traumatic events by joining religious movements. In Turkey, (8) _____ falsely declared himself Messiah and attracted many Jewish followers. The Hasidic movement was founded in Poland in the mid-18th century by the (9) _____. He taught that even an uneducated man could approach God directly through prayer.

In the German states, "(10) _____" were advisers to the wealthy, but most Jews still lived in an exclusively Jewish world.

- (11) _____ was among the first to break down psychological barriers by suggesting that Jews should participate in Western culture. His philosophy was the basis for the Jewish enlightenment, which is known as the (12) _____.

USING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Your teacher will help you understand the following document.

THE CHMIELNICKI MASSACRES (1648-1655)

In 1648, the prosperous Jewish community in Poland met with catastrophe, as Ukrainian Cossacks and Crimean Tartars went on a rampage. A contemporary author, Nathan of Hanover, describes the bloodshed:

There was no cruel device of murder in the whole world that was not perpetrated by the enemies. All the four death penalties: stoning, burning, beheading, and strangling were meted out to the Jews. Many were taken by the Tartars into captivity [...] They seized comely women as handmaids and housekeepers, some as wives and concubines. Similar atrocities were perpetrated in all the settlements through which they passed. Scrolls of the Law were torn to pieces, and turned into boots and shoes for their feet [...] Other sacred books served to pave the streets. Some were used for kindling purposes, and others to stuff the barrels of their guns.

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MAP

JEWISH MIGRATIONS IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD, 1492-1700

