

2: Protection from the powerful: how the first English Jews lived

You are standing before Sir Christopher Wren's St Lawrence Jewry in Gresham Street and just passed it the 15th century Guildhall from where the city of London is governed today. My name is Rabbi Yoni Birnbaum and for me, this is an ideal place to consider the political and religious position of medieval London Jewry.

A guildhall has been here roughly on the site of the Roman amphitheatre since at least the 1120s. The Guildhall may derive its name from the Anglo-Saxon word guild meaning payment. Londoners may at some point have paid their taxes on this spot. The London Jewish community was centred for much of the hundred years after the Norman conquest, albeit not exclusively, on the street now called Old Jewry, just southeast of here leading on to Cheapside, from the Anglo-Saxon cheap or market.

The Jews were at the centre of London, neither walled-in nor dispersed. Some, probably predominantly those with significant sums of money in their homes, lived in stone houses similar to the Jew's House which survives in Lincoln. From later records, it seems that Jewish settlement in London had shifted by the late 13th century westward to Milk Street, just to your southwest away from Old Jewry. From where they were crowded out by a monastery, new churches, and aristocrats taking over the Jews well built homes.

From the records of the Saladin Tithe, a tax raised during the 1180s to pay for a crusade to Jerusalem which never happened, we learn that among those tithed in London were Jews from Paris, Spain and Morocco. A contemporary chronicler noted that £70,000, equivalent to tens of millions today, was raised from English Christians, but £60,000 from all the Jews in England. Probably no more than 5,000 souls at any point. For comparison, at its peak, the home community of Rouen numbered around 6,000 people.

We know the names of several Jews living in England between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries. David of Oxford, for instance, perhaps the richest Jew in England in the mid-1200s and his widow Licoricia of Winchester, who continued her business until her murder in 1277. The collection of glosses on the Talmud, Tosafot Hakhmei Anglia, meaning glosses of the wise men of England, mentions Rabbi Moshe ben Yom-Tov of London, a halachic authority in his own right, and his sons Rabbi Eliyahu of London and the halachic authority Rabbi Berechiah de Nicole. Nicole being a French corruption of

Lincoln where Berechiah was Rabbi. Rabbi Jacob of Orléans is another acknowledged London Jew about whom we will soon learn more.

The Tosafot of London asked whether we should be concerned about bowing to pick up dropped coins with moulded images of men or beasts. The impression inadvertently given may be worship of the image, as the Talmud had earlier argued in relation to water fountains with carved pagan images. The Tosafot then argue that such images are not placed there for purposes of worship and therefore, there is no need to be concerned that bending over to pick up coins with such forms on them might be misconstrued as praying to them. This gives us some idea of the type of environment that the Tosafot Hakhmei Anglia lived in.

From the end of the 1100s, the whole English Jewish community was led by a presbyter, seemingly nominated within the community and confirmed by the Crown. This man was responsible to some degree for organising Jewish contributions to royal finances. At the same time as the role was created, so was the permanent exchequer of the Jews, a court of law which registered and assessed all the property debts and capital of the Jews, and which heard legal cases involving both Jews and Christians. Make no mistake, the Jew's property was the king's property to draw on as and when he felt the need.

King John appointed the first presbyter in 1199, giving Jacob the Jew the role for life. This may have been the Jacob of Londri, cited by the Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserles of Krakow, author of the Authoritative Ashkenazi Gloss on the Sephardi Shulchan Aruch, itself a cornerstone of observant Jewish life today. Rabbi Jacob, the Rama says, was accustomed to recite the entire Haggadah in the vernacular, so that the women and children would understand. A telling glimpse into London diaspora life. This scholar's ability may have tied in with the role of secular leadership. In any case, we know the job came with risks. While in ruin, King John ordained Jacob, ordering somewhat ominously, that no one might presume to molest or trouble him in any way and expressing the wish that Jacob lived securely, shielded, and peaceably defended.

The king further commanded that through whatever towns and places Jacob, presbyter of the Jews, our dear friend may pass you shall cause him to pass through and be conducted safely and freely with all belonging to him, nor allow any hindrance, hurt, or injury to be done to him any more than to ourselves. This is reassuring. It should be noted that Jews here could also take shelter in the tower of London. Admission to sanctuary though, declarations, personal favour, favours, and even friendships can

change with the seasons as the demands of politics and religion develop. Then we'll explore those issues at our next location.