The Jews of England 1066 to 1290

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Part 1 – Crossing the Sea

On 18th July 1290, corresponding to Tisha b'Av in the Jewish calendar, King Edward I of England commanded that the following proclamation he read in every city in every town:

William the Conqueror in Bayeux Tapestry

"Whereas the king has prefixed to all the Jews of his realm a certain time to pass out of the realm and he wills that they shall not be treated by his ministers or others otherwise has been customary, he orders the sheriff to cause proclamation to be made throughout his bailiwick prohibiting anyone from injuring or wronging the Jews the said time. He is ordered to cause the Jews to have safe conduct at their cost when they, with their chattels which the king has granted to them, direct their steps towards London in order to cross the sea, provided that before they leave they restore the pledges of Christians which are in the possession to those whom they belong."

The entire Jewish community had just 105 days till All Saints' Day, 1 November 1290, to leave the country or to be subjected to "the wolf's head bounty" a euphemism for death.

It is not clear exactly how many Jews remained in England in 1290. The expulsion followed several years of increasingly hard conditions through which the Jewish community was systematically impoverished. Many had already sought to leave. Some chroniclers writing in the 17th and 18th centuries have accounts of almost 16,000 Jews drowning as they were stranded on sandbanks or crammed into unseaworthy vessels. Apparently, those who trapped them and stole their property were subsequently caught and hanged.

However, in 1278 when Edward I arrested all Jews on charges of coin clipping, this was applied to a mere 680 families. Accordingly, more conservative estimates suggest that as few as 2,720 Jews remained in England to be expelled at the time of the order.

The Jews came to England with William the Conqueror. References to Jews present earlier, such as a document in which Witglaff of Mercia (833) endowed the monks of Croyland with "all the property that they had been given by any Christians or Jews", are not contemporaneous and are suspect.

When William invaded England in 1066, the local Anglo-Saxon population was around 2 million. He brought over only 10,000 Normans, appointing them to all the high offices, sweeping aside the entire ruling tier of Anglo-Saxons. He even had the church replace five bishops with Norman appointees. Power was his and his control was delegated through the feudal system across the land as documented meticulously in the Domesday book.

William of Malmesbury (1095 - 1143) explains why "it was the Conqueror transferred the London Jews from Rouen". They satisfied William's three important needs. First, highly literate, fluent in his own language and adept at other tongues, connected with Jewish communities back home they would be most helpful in commerce. Secondly, there was already a tradition of Jewish financiers and he needed these to pay for his troops. Thirdly, in using Jews as his tax collectors, he set them up as a buffer against the hostile conquered citizens.

After 224 years, however, England's Jews had served their purpose.