

Top 10 Antisemitic Legends and Stereotypes

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Western civilization has long been a bastion of wild, outrageous antisemitism. Scorned as outsiders, labeled as criminals, Jews have suffered millennia of persecution, intolerance, and horrific violence. These tragedies beg the question of why hatred for Judaism runs so deeply, in so many different cultures. To eliminate hatred, we must first understand it. And few methods of examining the roots of antisemitism are more revealing than studying folk tales and local stereotypes concerning these afflicted people. Below are ten of the most common and significant examples of anti-Semitic legends. This is in no way an exhaustive examination, but it does provide a starting point for those who wish to track the development of antisemitism.

10. Well Poisoning



One of the main accusations leveled against Jewish communities in Europe concerned the supposed poisoning of wells. One example can be found in a law passed by the leaders of Brandenburg, Germany in May 1349: “... it is said that the Jews have elsewhere dispatched many person through poisoning.” Many of these rumors started around the time of the outbreak of the Black Death. Considering that people in the Middle Ages had no idea how the Black Death spread, the idea that the plague was the result of sabotage or poisonings seemed logical to many populations. When social and political groups eager for power placed the blame on Jews, enraged rioters were more than eager to burn and massacre entire Jewish communities.

9. Part-Man, Part-Beast



During the Middle Ages, images depicting demons and the Devil emphasized grotesque, animalistic physical features. These included “horns, tails, protruding tongues ... [and] extra faces.” These characteristics were also assigned to those believed to be in the employ of Satan and his demons, i.e. Jews. Some of the legends about Jews stated that they had had horns, a goat’s head or beard, and even pig’s ears. Imagery depicting Jews as monstrous or physically grotesque became more and more commonplace. Stereotypes about the appearance of Jews also began to include sub-human characteristics: flat-footed, bowlegged, slanting forehead, puffy lips, and more.

8. Judensau



The Judensau (Jew’s Pig) was a visual motif that depicted Jews literally suckling at the teat of pigs. Additionally, many Judensau showed Jews eating fresh pig feces straight from the anus. The Devil also frequently appeared in these images. He was shown as being ecstatic about the consumption of sow milk and feces.

First appearing in Germany during the 13th century, the Judensau remained an almost distinctly Germanic image for six centuries. Judensau showed up on woodcuts, broadsheets, playing cards, and cathedral walls. Judensau also began to be depicted on secular buildings and structures, such as bridges and public monuments, thereby indicating that antisemitism was becoming more and more institutionalized in everyday life in their respective regions.

7. Jewish Doctors Kill Christians

Inge's Besuch bei einem Jüdischen Doktor



Hinter den Brillengliedern huseln zwei Verbrecheraugen und um die wulstigen Lippen spielt ein Grinsen.

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Inge sitzt im Wartezimmer des jüdischen Arztes. Sie musste eine lange Zeit warten. Sie blätterte in den Magazinen die auf dem Tisch liegen. Aber sie ist viel zu nervös, um mehr als ein paar Sätze zu lesen. Immer wieder muss sie an das Gespräch mit ihrer Mutter denken. Und immer wieder fällt ihr die Warnung der BDM-Führerin ein:

Ein Deutscher darf nicht zu einem jüdischen Doktor! Schon gar nicht ein deutsches Mädchen. Viele deutsche Mädchen gingen zum jüdischen Arzt um geheilt zu werden und fanden stattdessen Krankheit und Schande!

Wie Inge in das Wartezimmer kam, hatte sie eine seltsam Erregung gemacht. Vom Behandlungsraum des Doktors kamen Schreie.

Sie hörte die Stimme eines Mädchens: „Doktor! Doktor! Lass mich in Ruhe!“ Dann vernahm sie das spöttische Lachen eines Mannes. Dann war es plötzlich still.

Atemlos horchte Inge. „Was hat das zu bedeuten?“ fragte sie sich, und ihr Herz schlug schneller. Einmal mehr fielen ihr die Warnungen ihrer Bund deutscher Mädel-Führerin ein. Inge wartet nun schon seit einer Stunde. Wieder nimmt sie eines der Magazine und versucht zu lesen. Dann öffnet sich die Tür. Inge schaut auf. Der Jude erscheint. Ein Schrei kam auf Inges Mund. In Schrecken läßt sie die Zeitung fallen. Panisch springt sie auf. Ihre Augen starren in das Gesicht des jüdischen Doktors. Und dies ist das Gesicht des Teufels.

In der Mitte des teuflischen Gesichtes sitzt ein stark gekrümmte Nase. Hinter der Brille starren zwei kriminelle Augen. Und ein Grinsen geht über die vorstehenden Lippen. Ein Grinsen, das sagen will: „Jetzt hab ich dich endlich, kleines deutsches Mädchen!“

Der Jude kommt näher. Seine fetten Finger greifen nach ihr. Aber Inge hat sich vom ersten Schock wieder gefangen. Bevor der Jude sie packen kann, schlägt sie dem Judenthoktor in das Gesicht. Dann ein Sprung zur Tür. Atemlos rennt Inge die Stiege runter. Atemlos stürzt sie aus dem Judenhaus.

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Since Jews were considered to be evil, various taboos arose concerning how Christian communities should interact with them. One of the most insidious rumors stated that Jewish doctors cannot be trusted because they kill Christian patients. These rumors were sometimes reinforced by the Church.

The Church councils of Valladolid and Salamanca explicitly warned that Jewish doctors “kill the Christian people when administering medicaments to them.” But the idea of the murderous Jewish doctor also seeped into regional folklore. One example is a story in the book *Der Giftpilz* (*The Poisonous Mushroom*.) In the story, a young girl ignores her friends’ advice and visits a Jewish doctor, only for him to transform into a devil. Thankfully, she manages to escape. But other stories didn’t end so happily.

6. The Golem



The Golem is an “image or form that is given life through a magical formula.” Frequently characterized as a kind of robot or automaton, the Golem is a popular figure from Jewish mythology. According to Jewish tradition, Golems could be brought to life by writing one of the Names of God in the Hebrew Alphabet, either on their foreheads or on a piece of paper which is then stuffed in their mouths.


However, when non-Jewish communities adopted facets of this distinctly-Jewish legend, they became more destructive in nature. The German writer Jacques Offenbach adapted the Golem legend into a story entitled “The Golden Pot.” In it, the Jewish characters are portrayed as corrupt, and the Golem itself seen as the “crude embodiment [of] pride, lust and avarice.” The Golem legend has even continued into the modern era, being adapted to film several times, such as Paul Wegener’s 1920 opus *The Golem, How He Came into the World*. While praised for accurately depicting medieval Jewish life, this film has also been accused of harboring anti-Semitic sentiments.

5. The Wandering Jew



The Wandering Jew is a figure in Christian mythology who is doomed to wander the Earth until the Second Coming, for rebuffing or striking Christ during his trip to Calvary to be crucified. The first recorded variation of the Wandering Jew archetype appeared in the writings of Roger of Wendover, a monk of St. Albans. In this version, he converted to Christianity and has since lived a godly life. However, the legend served to re-enforce the idea that Jews are a people cursed by God. It has been claimed that the prevalence of the Wandering Jew myth, and the accompanying belief that it proved that Jews were wicked, was a direct cause of antisemitic violence during the Middle Ages. The Wandering Jew was also adopted as a symbol by German antisemites in the nineteenth century. Tragically, this led to the Wandering Jew being used as propaganda in the Nazi Party.

4. Jewish Deicide



1198-1216

Pope Innocent III

"The Jews, by their own guilt, are consigned to perpetual servitude because they crucified the Lord... As slaves rejected by God, in whose death they wickedly conspire, they shall by the effect of this very action, recognize themselves as the slaves of those whom Christ's death set free."

Jewish Deicide is the belief that Jews are responsible for the murder of Jesus and, by extension, God. This comes from the various Christian Gospel narratives which claim that Jesus was prosecuted and crucified by Jews. This fueled many Christians into believing that it was their duty to continuously punish Jews, and that Jewish suffering was God's will. Additionally, many thought that Jewish social degradation confirmed the superiority of the Christian faith. Therefore, the continual misery of the Jewish people became a form of legitimacy for the Church. Prosecuting Jews became a priority instead of a mere cultural bias. Incredibly, the Catholic Church didn't officially repudiate the Jewish Deicide charge until the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

3. Evil Moneylenders



One of the most popular and enduring stereotypes about Jews is that they are greedy and untrustworthy when it comes to money. This stereotype can be largely contributed to accusations of Jewish moneylenders taking excessive interest on money loaned to Christians. During times of economic instability, many commoners were forced to deal with Jewish moneylenders. Historically, many of these moneylenders did charge high interest rates, since they were at risk from violence and debt absolution from non-Jewish governments. Since usury was considered a crime by Christians, these high interest rates inspired hatred and contempt.

One of the most famous examples of this stereotype can be found in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the character of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender who demands a pound of flesh from the hero Antonio when he cannot pay his loan back.

2. Host Desecration



The first accusations of host desecration, acts of violence and/or blasphemy against the host wafer used during the Christian Sacrament of Holy Communion, took place near Berlin in the thirteenth century. For the next six centuries, claims of host desecration became one of the primary justifications for the persecution and expulsion of Jewish communities. Many Jews who were found guilty of the crime were executed.

But as terrible as host desecration was, it pails in comparison to the effects and longevity of another horrific rumor with which it was frequently paired. That rumor is the number one entry on this list...

1. Blood Libel



During the Middle Ages, Jews were accused of killing Christian children, collecting their blood, and consuming it. Some claimed that they used the blood to make Passover matzo. But what mattered wasn't necessarily what the Jews allegedly used the blood for, but the fact that they were brutally torturing and killing good Christians for it. Blood libel was a primary cause of pogroms and other waves of anti-Semitic violence and hatred throughout the West.

But accusations of blood libel aren't just limited to Christendom. The legend of blood libel crept into the Arab world sometime in the 19th century. Perhaps the most famous example of blood libel is "The Prioress's Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In the story, a seven-year-old boy is savagely murdered by Jews for singing a Christian hymn while walking through their street. But the boy's body miraculously continues to sing, gathering the attention of local Christians, who hang the Jews for their crime.

6 “Once there was a Jew whose name was Master Aḥima‘az; to Jerusalem, the glorious city, he journeyed¹¹⁵ twice or thrice to fulfill vows, and on each journey he took with him one hundred gold coins, as he had vowed to the Rock of his Salvation, to benefit those who engaged in His Torah and the mourners of the dwelling of His magnificence.¹¹⁶ On his third journey, he requested me from my mother, with this request: ‘Give him to me to be with me, to journey with me, to satisfy me, and to do my service; I will conduct him and from me you shall ask for him;¹¹⁷ and if I do not bring him then have I sinned unto God, me and my sons’. Thus we set out cheerfully, without sorrow or sighing. As we were sitting to eat at the table of the head of the academy,¹¹⁸ the scholars of the curia¹¹⁹ began to chant: ‘Let us engage in praise, lovely singing and pleasant hymn, with love and devotion, to Him Who is preeminent among a myriad’.¹²⁰ They cast their eyes upon their disciples, who sat before them, and their head of the academy looked at them and said to them: ‘The young man who sits among us, who came with our colleague Master Aḥima‘az, will cheer us and gladden our hearts with the flow from his springs [of knowledge]¹²¹ with his sensi’ble discourse’. Then I began with hymn, with melody and chant, to praise in awe Him Who is clad in light.”¹²²

7 “There sat a man, one qualified and aged,¹²³ who, listening to my song, meditated in his heart and began to weep, his eyes poured bitter tears. Master Aḥima‘az looked at him and discerned¹²⁴ his deeds; he rose from the meal, came before his feet and made him vow in the

¹¹⁵ The Hebrew עלה (going up) denotes a journey from everywhere in the world to the Holy Land and from everywhere in the Holy Land to Jerusalem. The underlying assumption is that the Holy Land is the highest land of the world and Jerusalem the loftiest place in the Holy Land. The journey is thus clearly a pilgrimage in the widely accepted sense of the word.

¹¹⁶ The scholars of the Palestinian Academy of Jerusalem and the Karaite “Mourners of Zion.” For the meaning of the term and its significance here see chap. 5 of the introductory essay.

¹¹⁷ The Hebrew phrasing echoes Reuben’s commitment to Jacob (Gen. 43:9) in the sense of “you may hold me responsible for him.”

¹¹⁸ Head of the Academy = ראש הישיבה.

¹¹⁹ The Hebrew term pointing to the setting of the scholars of the Academy (הרחבה) is quite intriguing. The author of the Toledo ms. Italian translation, presumably perplexed, translated literally “discepoli della largura.” It may indicate the meeting place of the assembly, somehow calling to mind the Roman curia. In my view, this rendering must be preferred to other admittedly no less tortuous

possibilities, such as a metonymic allusion to the Torah (Salzman: “the teachers of the Law”) or to the Land of Israel, called “large and fat land” (Neh. 9:35), since Babylonia is also called similarly (Jer. 51:58).

¹²⁰ Cf. Song of Sol. 5:10.

¹²¹ I.e., his knowledge. Cf. Prov. 5:15, traditionally interpreted as diffusion of knowledge through numerous pupils (see, for instance, Rashi in loco).

¹²² See n. 80 above.

¹²³ “Qualified and aged” translates *zaken ve-sab* (זקן ושב). It is not clear whether the two predicate nouns should be understood simply as synonyms pointing to the respectability of the person because of his age, or whether one denotes age and the other hereditary honorable status, such as *presbyteros* or *gerousiarches*. Be that as it may, it should be noted that the couplet *zaken ve-sab* is definitely not frequent in medieval literary works.

¹²⁴ For the complex meaning of this term, see n. 29 above. The text makes unmistakably clear that Master Ahima‘az understood that the man’s weeping was related to the fate of the boy.

name of God to reveal his crying to him. He made his reply and informed him clearly that a harsh decree had been issued by Mighty God, that it was certain and true that this young man soon would die. When the pious one heard this, his eyes filled with tears, he tore his clothes and disheveled his head,¹²⁵ and told them all: ‘I have no longer life in this world, for I have sworn to his mother to restore him to her without calamity and evil; how can I return to my home and the boy not be with me?’¹²⁶ The oath which I have sworn shall destroy my hope and expectation’.¹²⁷ When they saw his sorrow and mournful tears, they wrote the Holy Name which was written in the Sanctuary, they made an incision in the flesh of my right arm and in the place where they cut the flesh there they placed the Name;¹²⁸ so I came safely from there, I returned to my home and my mother, and as long as Master Ahima‘az lived¹²⁹ I fled from isles unto isles.¹³⁰ Now I live on ever since those days, if I so desire, forever, for no man can know the place where the Name is, unless I reveal it. But I shall show you and here I am in your hands, do with me as you see fit.” Then they brought the shroud, he got up onto it and showed them the place of the incision, the Master made there an incision and extracted from within the Name, and the body was left without soul and the inanimate body¹³¹ fell decayed as if it had been decaying for many years and the flesh returned to dust.

¹²⁵ I.e., his hair. These are traditional ritual acts of mourning.

¹²⁶ Cf. Gen. 44:30.

¹²⁷ In the world to come. For the perception of oaths and their breaking, see pp. 186–187, above.

¹²⁸ On the meaning of the story within the context of Judaeo-Christian confrontation, see chap. 5 of the introductory essay.

¹²⁹ Should one take this sequence of events at face value, the episode of Rabbi Aharon's unveiling the truth of the matter would have occurred after—perhaps much after—the death of Aḥima'az the elder, which means somehow *later* than the episode of Silano (§9), reported in the Chronicle as having occurred *prior to* the death of Aḥima'az the elder. According to our methodological guidelines, however, such a discrepancy (This is already cut off in the original PDF of Hasan-rokem)

¹³⁰ The scanty resemblance of the motif to that of the Wandering Jew was cogently rejected by Salzman, *Chronicle*, 66, n. 2. And yet, there is room for further speculation upon taking into consideration the strongly anti-Christian allusions of the tale, and especially the quite unusual wording “from isles unto isles” (מֵאִיִּם לְאִיִּם), calling to mind Dan. 11:18. On the motif of the Wandering Jew, see Glikson, “Wandering Jew.”

¹³¹ גּוֹלֵם. On the development of the idea of the golem from antiquity to the early modern period, see Idel, *Golem* 299 and 303, nn. 18–19.

27 I will utter my knowledge²⁸⁵ to relate the wonders performed by R. Ḥananel. He had a younger brother,²⁸⁶ whose name was Papoleon, and he was parted from him at an early age: when his day came and he died and his fate was sealed,²⁸⁷ his brothers²⁸⁸ were away in Benevento on their business²⁸⁹ and R. Ḥananel delayed bringing him to burial in the ancestral tomb, awaiting his brothers until they came to grieve and weep over their deceased brother, to cry, to eulogize, to lament.²⁹⁰ And to prevent stench and putrefaction, so the flesh of his brother should not putrefy,²⁹¹ he inscribed the Name of God, his Creator, on a piece of parchment and placed the parchment under his tongue and the Name resurrected him²⁹² and he raised him up and he [Papoleon] sat in his bed, and placed a book before him and he contemplated it, gazing with his eyes. And that very night preceding [the day of] his brothers' arrival, they beheld a great wonder in their dream; an angel of God in a mirror image appeared to them as in a vision, and told them strange things: "Why do you vex the Lord God by doing unworthy things, the Lord brings about death and you restore life. Do not do this, do not try the Lord your God."²⁹³ But they knew not what had been done, what R. Ḥananel had done. When they arrived at their home, he came out to greet them, and they went to see their brother and found him sitting in his bed; they were unaware of the deed and of the Name under his tongue they knew not. They heard the whole story in detail and cried in a wailing and bitter tone, and to their brother they cried

²⁸⁵ After Job 36:3 (אִשָּׁא דְעִי לְמִרְחֹק).

²⁸⁶ According to the recollection of Aḥima'az, the only surviving brothers of Ḥananel would be Shephatiah and Eleazar, about whom nothing more is known nor is said by Aḥima'az. There is however no need to presume that "young brother" should mean "cousin," as hypothesized by some (cf. Salzman, *Chronicle*, 77; Klar, *Chronicle*, 146), for such a hypothesis would burden the text with unnecessary speculations. Neither should one wonder why Shefatiah would have been mentioned here almost in passing, for as will immediately become clear, §§ 27–32 originate from the family of Ḥananel, the direct predecessors of Aḥima'az.

²⁸⁷ The wording is definitely unusual. In medieval sources it occurs once in a line of סֵדֶר מְקַבְּלֵי הַתּוֹרָה וְלוֹמְדֶיהָ ("Order of the recipients of the Torah and its scholars") included in *Maḥzor Vitri*, 483: בִּשְׁנַת תַּחֲ"א נֶאֱסַף רַבִּינָא סוֹף הוֹרָאָה וְנִסְתָּם. As the editor points out in loco, some would prefer to correct the text and read וְנִחְתָּם הַתְּלִמּוֹד, as in fact did R. Shimshon of Chinon in *Sefer Keritut*. Indeed, it may well be that the wording must be understood as being elliptic, i.e., that the word הַתְּלִמּוֹד should be added after וְנִסְתָּם. And yet, the wording in our text may also suggest that the lectio difficilior of *Maḥzor Vitri* is preferable, i.e., that נִסְתָּם should be understood as a synonym of נֶאֱסַף. In that case it would also be understood as elliptic, instead of וְנִסְתָּם הַגּוֹלֵל, which appears very frequently in rabbinic literature.

²⁸⁸ See n. 285 above.

²⁸⁹ After Gen. 39:11. Perceptive readers might detect here a double meaning according to the Talmudic discussion related to that verse (TB Sot. 36b), that is, the possibility that the journey of Ḥananel's brothers to Benevento on business could be a cover for less innocent matters. But there is no way to ascertain that on the basis of our present knowledge.

²⁹⁰ The sequence of verbs follows the order of ritual stages preceding and accompanying burial: first לָעֵן, to feel the sense of loss, as does a woman whose husband has disappeared but cannot yet be declared a widow; second, לָאֵן, to enter the liminal status preceding the burial, characterized by almost total exemption from religious duties; third, to cry, during the burial ceremony; fourth, to deliver eulogies during the burial ceremony; and finally to have lament executed formally (i.e., ritually, by women professionally trained for that purpose) during the burial.

²⁹¹ It stands to reason that sensible Jews would perceive here an oblique allusion to the recurring invective referring to Jesus as a putrefied body.

²⁹² Rabbi Ḥananel performs here the same magic act as did Rabbi Aharon in restituting the young man of Benevento to a state of death (§7).

²⁹³ The wording follows Deut. 6:16.

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out “You were able to bring him to life, you must also able to put him to death.” Then R. Ḥananel went crying, morose, and bewailing, and moaning he said to his brother: “Give me your mouth and I will kiss you.” And the dead man opened his mouth and he kissed him, and he placed his hand under his tongue and removed from there the Name inscribed on parchment. Immediately the Name was removed from him, his inanimate body²⁹⁴ fell onto the bed, and it returned to dust and putrefaction, and the spirit went to God Who had bestowed it.

noot 294: “Inanimate body” translates *golem*; see n. 131 above.