

## prologue

STUDENTS OF JEWISH HISTORY are aware that medieval Spanish Jewry enjoyed a golden age for five hundred years prior to the Inquisition. It is less well known that the Jews of Northern France possessed at least a silver age for approximately two hundred years at the beginning of the second millennium, in the peace that existed between the final Norse invasion and the start of the One Hundred Years War. Ironically it was through the efforts of two unknown inventors that this period of prosperity, tolerance and intellectual accomplishment was set in motion.

Midway through the eleventh century, the ideas of covering both a plough's wooden nose and a horse's delicate hooves with metal precipitated a revolution in agriculture. With the power of a horse hitched to his sturdy steel-plated plough, a peasant was able to work the heavy soil deeper and faster. Productivity skyrocketed and for the first time in its history, the land of Northern France yielded more food than its inhabitants could eat.

Eager to trade their surplus produce for luxuries, the French lords found the Jews, who had lived among them since the days of the Romans, a perfect partner. The Jewish merchant knew that, no matter how far away he traveled, he'd always find other Jews who shared the Hebrew language, who would shelter him in their midst, and who trusted him implicitly. They also provided invaluable information, such as which goods could be acquired cheaply and which were in demand, as well as which routes were safe and which were dangerous. Thus Jews enjoyed a great advantage in commerce.

In the feudal system, the Jews' social status was high, equal to that of knights. The Jewish trader was a welcome visitor to French estates, buying their surfeit produce and selling them imported goods. Money-lending,

the frequently perceived source of Jewish income during the Middle Ages, was not yet a common livelihood among the Jews, only becoming widespread centuries later when other professions became restricted.

Another misconception about the Middle Ages is that Jews suffered greatly from anti-Semitism. While there was no love lost between most Jews and their Christian neighbors prior to the First Crusade, relations between them were cordial and occasional friendships flourished. The Jews and their fellow citizens dressed the same, spoke the same language, and shared the same interest in local politics.

The Catholic Church preached tolerance, with sanctioned persecution still years away. The split between Roman and Byzantium Christians was recent enough that much of the Church's attention was focused on attempts to heal it, and besides, the Church was too busy consolidating its own power and purging France of heretical Christian sects to take much notice of the Jews. In addition, there were still pagans in Europe, and the Church saw them as a higher priority for conversion than the Jews.


Times were good. Commerce increased. Cities sprang up where trade routes crossed. The cities organized fairs where many merchants could buy and sell together, and the rulers who encouraged these fairs grew rich by taxing the transactions that took place at them. And the greatest of these fairs were the two that were held in Troyes, the capital of the French province whose ruler was the Count of Champagne.

Here our chronicle begins. In 1068 Salomon ben Isaac is unknown, but in one hundred years, he will be considered one of the greatest Jewish scholars who ever lived. The first Hebrew book printed will be his Bible commentary, and when the Talmud is printed in the fifteenth century, his extraordinarily clear and concise commentary will fill the inside column of every page. Then he will be known as "Rashi," a Hebrew acronym for Rabbi Shlomo ha Yitzhaki.

Even today, no Talmud is printed without his comments in that same spot, and the words of his grandsons and disciples, known as the Tosaphists, are found on the outside column. But our tale is not really about him or about his grandsons. It is the story of the forgotten generation between them, Rashi's daughters.

# one

Troyes, France  
Spring 4829 (1069 C.E.)

he cold slowly forced Joheved awake. Sure that Miriam, her younger sister, was comfortably wrapped in more than her share of bedding, Joheved reached out for the covers, only to find them still in their proper place, topped by the rough blanket that Mama had woven from their first clumsy attempts to spin thread from raw wool. There wasn't a hint of morning light, so Joheved snuggled under the covers, determined to ignore her discomfort and find sleep again. Her feet were freezing, but getting up to find her hose would just make them worse. If only she and Miriam could have a charcoal brazier in their room at night. She sighed.

Why did Mama and Papa have to be so secretive about being poor? Did they think they could protect her from poverty by never mentioning it, by telling her that only babies and old people needed their rooms heated once Passover was finished? A girl in her twelfth year was old enough to be told the truth. Joheved rubbed her feet against each other to warm them and bumped into something small lying at the edge of the bed. The room's silence was broken by purring.

People might think it odd that cats slept in Joheved's house at night, but Papa was a scholar who owned valuable manuscripts made of parchment. It was his cats' responsibility to keep mice from nibbling on them, and three cats seemed to be sufficient to protect his treasured collection. Papa once joked that he was merely a three-cat chacham, while his old teacher, Jacob ben Yakar of Worms, had been a seven-cat chacham, and Rabbenu Gershom—Light of the Exile, who died before Papa was even born, surely he had been a ten-cat *talmid chacham*.

Joheved nudged the cat and moved her feet onto the warm spot the creature had vacated. Pleased at this solution, she listened to the small

noises outside as she waited for sleep to overtake her. Every so often, the clip-clop of horses' hooves or crunch of cartwheels echoed on a nearby road. What errands kept someone away from home at this hour, when the demon Agrat bat Machlat and her eighteen myriads stalked the night outside?

Joheved shivered and pulled the blankets tighter around her. She had just about drifted off when a low-pitched moan, like someone in pain, jerked her back to consciousness. But this noise wasn't from outside; it was coming from just beyond the bedroom door. Terrified of what had to be an approaching demon, Joheved dived under the covers and grabbed for Miriam.

And felt no one.

A frantic search proved that she was alone in their bed. Convinced that the demon who had somehow taken Miriam was coming for her, she recited the words she'd been taught to say if evil spirits ever threatened her.

"Be split, be accursed, broken and banned, you son of mud, son of clay, like Shamgaz, Merigaz and Istemaah," Joheved whispered through chattering teeth, and then, because incantations said three times were the most powerful, she repeated it twice more. Heart pounding, she waited.

And waited. The cat, still purring, nosed its head under her hand, eager to be scratched. Her fear slowly dissipating, Joheved began to feel both relieved and foolish. How often had she watched the cats chase their invisible prey? Surely no cat would lie so contentedly in her bed if demons lurked nearby.

The world was plagued with evil spirits: from Ashmadia, King of Demons, and Shibeta, who strangles children with croup or whooping cough, to the *cauchmares*, who bring on bad dreams, and little Feltrech, responsible for tangling a sleeper's long hair at night. There were more demons than there were people. Most feared of all was Lillit, whose prey was women in childbirth and their newborn babies. And Mama was due to give birth any day now.

Mon Dieu, what if Mama was in labor right now? Was that where Miriam had gone? It would be just like her little sister too, leaving her to miss out on all the excitement. The cold forgotten, Joheved jumped out of bed. She groped her way along the wall to the pole holding their clothes where, in fact, only her own were hanging. She hurriedly slipped her long linen chemise over her head, making for the doorway at the same time.