

Introduction to *Understanding the Holocaust*

Anti-Semitism has also been defined as "*dislike of the unlike.*" This definition partly explains why anti-Jewish feelings have persisted over 2,000 years. From ancient times, because Jews were exiled from their homeland in **Palestine**, they scattered far and wide. They settled in many lands among people whose customs and beliefs differed from their own. Cultural differences not only singled the Jews out from their neighbors but also often triggered suspicion and hostility.

Up until the end of the Middle Ages, Jews were persecuted for their religious beliefs. **Judaism**, the Jewish religion, is not only based on the belief of one God in heaven (**monotheism**), but is also a way of life. A code of religious laws governs what observant Jews eat, how they behave, even how they think.

No matter where Jews migrated or what people they lived under, the story was the same. They were always a minority religious group. Roman and Greek pagans, Christians, and Muslims alike frowned on Judaism's "*strange*" behaviors and beliefs. First they tried to persuade, then to force Jews to accept their God or gods and goddesses. Jews rejected the deities of all others: the idols of pagans; Jesus, the Messiah of Christians; and Muhammad, the prophet of the Muslims. Believing they had a special covenant with God, Jews held fast to their own beliefs. This was how the trouble always started.

The so-called "**Jewish Question**" arose in many lands. "*What should we do about this Jewish minority among us?*" asked the angry and shocked natives. Superstition and fear soon took hold. People view Jews as **aliens**, or foreigners, living among them. They began to call them wicked and evil. They used them as **scapegoats** for every disaster that came along, including floods and earthquakes. They began to punish them. Finally, the passage of discriminatory laws made the mistreatment of Jews an acceptable practice in many communities.

Jews became social outcasts. Anti-Jewish laws stripped them of all rights including the privileges of owning land or of engaging in any profession to support their families. Jewish breadwinners were forced into occupations shunned by non-Jews: often trading and money-lending.

Their small numbers made them easy targets for abuse. As a result, religious persecution kept them on the move for centuries. Eventually, the **diaspora**, or Jewish settlements in countries other than Palestine (Israel), became worldwide.

Western Europe – especially the countries of Germany, France, and Spain – was the center of Jewish life in the Middle Ages. However, harsh persecutions between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries forced most Jews to migrate to **Eastern Europe**. There remained the heartland of European Jewish life until well into the twentieth century.

In the meantime, despite the increasing religious tolerance of the modern world, anti-Semitism did not disappear. It seemed the pattern of resentment and nonacceptance had too long been set.

As the medieval feudal economy gave way to industrialization and the growth of cities, Jews, with their long experience in trade and money lending, joined with non-Jews and became involved in business and banking. Their participation in these areas helped to bring about economic progress in Europe. They also took part in the struggle for equal rights that had swept over Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and eventually won their **emancipation**, or freedom. However,