

# Lesson Guide: Class Twelve

## Under Crescent and Cross

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Miller Introduction to  
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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## **Lesson Guide for Class #12: Under Crescent and Cross**

### **Class Summary:**

Overview of Jewish history from the end of the Talmudic Period until the dawn of the Modern Period. Focus on the contributions of significant personalities, including Rashi, Rambam, and Joseph Karo. Exploration of the development of Kabbalah. Emphasis on the question: What role do the contributions of the Middle Ages — literary, halakhic, and mystical play in contemporary Judaism?

### **Objectives:**

*Students will:*

- Become familiar with the basic history of the Jewish Middle Ages, with particular emphasis on the major personalities.
- Explore the history of Kabbalah and understand the role that Kabbalah has played in shaping Jewish notions of God.
- Study a few representative texts from this period to continue to develop their ability to read and understand Jewish primary sources.

### **Key Vocabulary:**

- |                       |                           |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| ▪ Rashi               | ▪ Mishneh Torah           |
| ▪ Maimonides (Rambam) | ▪ Guide for the Perplexed |
| ▪ Joseph Karo         | ▪ Shulchan Aruch          |
| ▪ Moses DeLeon        | ▪ Zohar                   |
| ▪ Isaac Luria         | ▪ Tzfat                   |

### **In-Person Teaching Materials:**

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos
- Optional: Humash with Rashi and/or Mikraot Gedolot, volume of Mishneh Torah, Guide for the Perplexed, Shulchan Aruch, and Zohar—all so students can see and encounter these books in the original.

### **Online Teaching Materials:**

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.
- Optional: Humash with Rashi and/or Mikraot Gedolot, volume of Mishneh Torah, Guide for the Perplexed, Shulchan Aruch, and Zohar—all so students can see and encounter these books in the original.

### **Set Induction: “Four Epochs of Jewish History”**

It is possible to divide Jewish history into four major epochs:

- Biblical – the time period covered by the Tanakh
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple/Rabbinic – 500 BCE – 500 CE.
- Middle Ages – 500 CE – Enlightenment (~1800 CE)
- Modern – Enlightenment to Present Day

The Middle Ages is the time period during which most Jews live in diasporic communities in lands ruled by Islam and Christianity (under crescent and cross).

### **Lecture: Living under Crescent and Cross**

**Under Islam:** Jews generally lived better under Islam than those living in Christian society. Muslim societies offered legal protection to Jews as fellow “Peoples of the Book” (ahl al-kitab), meaning that communities were not generally subject to violence or expulsion. Instead, they were given a second-class legal status (dhimmi — albeit with limited rights, special taxes, etc.)

Overall, given that Jews lived more secure from violence in the Muslim world, with periodic “Golden Ages” of full participation in society (at various times in Spain, Egypt, Baghdad), there was greater cultural creativity in these countries than in the countries of Western Europe.

**Under Christianity:** Jews living under Christian rule were subject to violence and persecution throughout the Middle Ages. Jews were generally forbidden to own land or to participate in the guilds or professions, limiting them to the roles of shopkeepers or money lenders. The Middle Ages saw incidents of violence against the Jewish community because of the Blood Libel, as part of the Crusades, in response to the Black Plague, among other times. As Western European countries centralized leadership, they began to expel their Jews en masse — every country in Western Europe expelled their Jews at least once during this period. Jews generally migrated east toward the less developed and freer lands of Poland and Russia.

Some key dates you may wish to highlight from this period, include:

### **622 The Rise of Islam**

Muhammed (570-632) proclaimed a new revelation in 610. He went first to the Jewish community of Mecca, whom he respected as fellow monotheists, but was rejected. In 623, he emigrated to Medina (the hijra) and established Islam there. Within the next century, the Islamic caliphate would conquer most of the Middle East, including the Land of Israel in 638. Jews would generally retain their right to practice Judaism but live as second-class citizens under Muslim rule.

### **912-1090 The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry**

This approximately 200-year period of remarkable toleration in Muslim Spain saw Jews rise to high office in the caliph's court, gain political and economic power, and produce significant works of cultural creativity. During this period, poets, including Shlomo ibn Gabirol (Adon Olam) and Yehudah ha-Levi wrote, as did the philosopher Bakhya ibn Pakuda (Chovot ha-Levavot) and the commentator ibn Ezra. The Golden Age of Spain ended with the conquest of the Muslim Almohades, who invaded from North Africa and offered the Jews the three options of conversion, exile, or death.

### **1095 Start of the Crusades**

Pope Urban II declared the first of a series of holy wars over the next two hundred years, aimed at conquering the Holy Land from the Muslims. The

Crusaders decimated Jewish populations along their route, including in the cities of Speyer, Worms, Mainz, and Cologne. When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099, the Jewish community was locked in a synagogue and burned. The Crusades marked a significant increase in violence against Jews throughout the Christian world.

### **1347 Outbreak of the Plague**

The introduction of the Bubonic Plague into Europe from Asia in 1347 led to the death of between 30 and 60% of Europe's population. Anti-Jewish riots resulted from claims that the Jews had caused the Plague by poisoning wells, ultimately destroying more than 500 Jewish communities in places ranging from Barcelona to Basel to Strasburg. Accusations against the Jews were compounded by the Jewish community's lower incidence of the disease, likely because of rituals that promoted hygiene, including handwashing and mikvah immersion.

### **1492 Expulsion of the Jews of Spain**

While the Spanish expulsion of Jews was among the most traumatic events in Jewish history, it wasn't the only expulsion: Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, France in 1306, Hungary in 1349, Austria in 1421, etc. In July 1492, the newly re-Christianized Spain expelled 200,000 Jews after decades of persecution under the Spanish Inquisition.

### **1516 First Jewish ghetto established**

These sealed, Jewish neighborhoods – whose gates were locked at night and during Christian holidays -- began in Italy. The concept would much later be used by the Nazis, who would revive the institution in Poland.

### **1648 Shabbatai Zevi's Messianic Movement**

Following centuries of intense persecution, the worldwide Jewish community caught a messianic fever – with perhaps half or more of all Jews believing that a Turkish Jew named Shabbatai Zevi was the messiah. However, this mass movement ended abruptly when Zevi converted to Islam.

**Break**

**Lecture & Text Study: “Great Minds of the Jewish Middle Ages”**

One of the most important ways that the Medieval Period continues to be relevant for Modern Judaism is through the writings of some of Judaism's most influential teachers who lived during this time. Each of these figures continues to play a significant role in shaping Jewish life and thought:

**RASHI (1040-1104, France)**

The greatest commentator on the Torah and Talmud, whose comments are always studied alongside the Biblical or Rabbinic texts. Rashi was one of many commentators at this time whose works can all be seen together on the pages of classic printings of the Torah, including Mikraot Gedolot.

**RAMBAM (aka Maimonides, 1135-1205 Spain/Egypt)**

Author of the first comprehensive code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, and the greatest of all works of Jewish philosophy, the Guide for the Perplexed. The Mishneh Torah is the first attempt to draw together all the laws found in the Torah and in the Rabbinic Tradition to provide a complete picture of Jewish law. It not only deals with matters of ritual and interpersonal law but also includes sections on theology, ethics, statecraft, and even the laws for society after the coming of the Messiah.

The Guide for the Perplexed was Rambam's attempt to synthesize Greek philosophy and scientific teachings with Jewish theology. Its essential question is: "How can an educated, worldly person continue to find relevance in Judaism?" It attempts to answer that question by dealing with issues like science & religion, Biblical literalism, non-anthropomorphic theology, and the importance of secular education alongside religious study.

**Joseph KARO (1488-1575, Spain/Israel)**

Karo was a legalist and mystic. He was the author of Judaism's most widely accepted and authoritative code of law, the Shulchan Aruch. One of the elements that make the S.A. so singular is that it incorporates both the rulings of the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi world, making it authoritative for the entire Jewish community—not just a portion of it.

*Break up the lecture by having students study a primary text from the coursebook, either "Rashi on Creation," which includes four of Rashi's most famous comments on Genesis 1, or Maimonides' "Letter to Ovadia the Convert," in which Rambam lays out his theology of acceptance of converts. For either text, you may wish to have students first tackle the texts in hevruta and then discuss them together as a group.*

**Lecture & Text Study: "Kabbalah"**

Students are generally curious to learn something about Kabbalah. This is not an adequate time to give anything more than a highly cursory introduction to the subject. However, students may find it interesting to discuss the development of Jewish mystical traditions. While not all of this strictly occurred during the Middle Ages, much of Kabbalah's most important flowering happened during this period.

Before beginning to explain the timeline of the development of Kabbalah, it is necessary to define:

**Mysticism:** A belief that God can be directly experienced through meditation and other ritual practices.

What distinguishes mystical from non-mystical theology is that a mystic doesn't just speak about God; they attempt to use their tradition and its tools to discover clues about how to experience God directly. This might be compared to discussing dinner versus eating dinner or reading about love versus embracing your lover. Most religious traditions have a mystical branch.

**Kabbalah** (“that which has been received”) is Jewish mysticism, the branch of Jewish inquiry that deals with questions about God's hidden, essential nature.

The first two texts presented in the coursebook/slide deck (Mishnah Hagiga 2:1 and BT Hagiga 14b) show the normative, rabbinic critique of Kabbalah, that questions of this nature bring a person “out of the world” and may even be dangerous. Yet, the fact that the Rabbis felt the need to warn about Kabbalah, of course, means that Jews have always been curious about these sorts of questions and practices!

Some of the most critical periods in the history of Kabbalah fall during the Middle Ages:

### **13th Century- SPAIN**

Publication of the Zohar and popularization of the idea of sefirot—divine emanations. Zohar was published by Moses DeLeon, although he attributed it to the 3rd century Sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The Zohar functions as a commentary on the Torah but differs from the other commentaries we've studied so far. Instead of trying to explain the text's plain meaning, the Zohar posits that the Torah is like a code and that its characters and events are merely symbols whose interactions and statements point to mystical knowledge about the nature of God.

*Discuss the Zohar text included in the coursebook/slide deck, Be'haalotkha 23a, which clearly states how the Zohar thinks of Torah: "The stories of the Torah are only her outer garments."*

### **16th Century- TSFAT**

The emergence of Rabbi Isaac Luria and his alternative creation story: God begins Creation by an act of self-retraction (tzimtzum), and then emanates energy into the void, but that energy breaks apart (shvira), and the result is that we need to engage in gathering the sparks (tikkun olam).

*Discuss Cordovero (another significant Tsfat Kabbalist) text in the coursebook/slide deck for an example of kabbalistic panentheism—the belief that everything is part of God.*

### **Wrap Up and Reflection**

*Journal Prompt: "The Middle Ages produced some of Judaism's most powerful ideas is there an idea or figure from this class you'd like to learn more about? Why?"*

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to name several key figures from the Middle Ages and discuss some of the contributions that have enduring value from this time period to modern Judaism.

### **At Home Work**

Students should be told to watch the "Under Crescent and Cross" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.