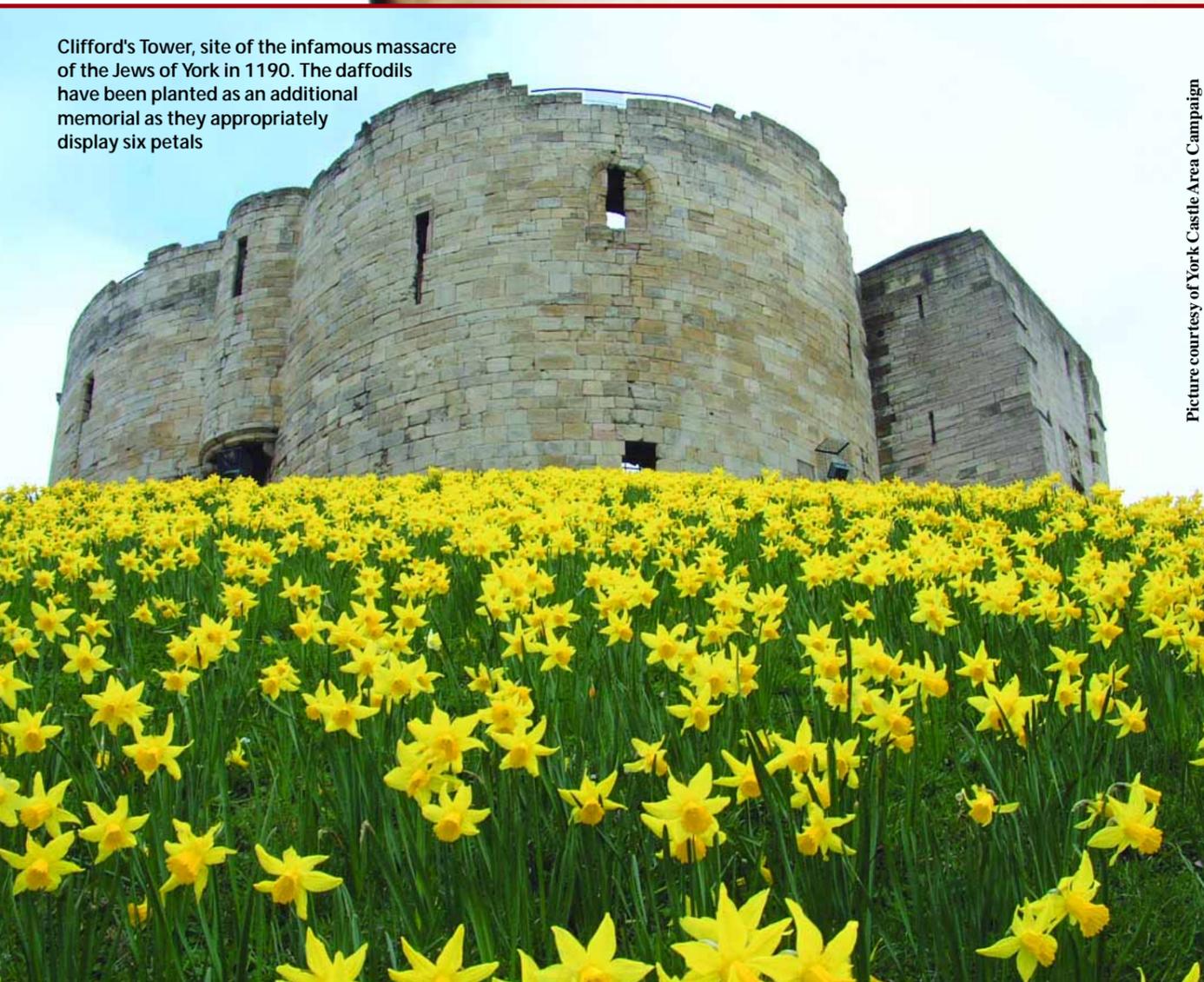


YORK'S BLACKEST HOUR

The infamous Shabbos HaGadol massacre of the Jews of York in 1190 was the most notorious example of anti-Semitism in medieval England.

Clifford's Tower, site of the infamous massacre of the Jews of York in 1190. The daffodils have been planted as an additional memorial as they appropriately display six petals



Picture courtesy of York Castle Area Campaign

by Baruch ben Chayil

My British-born *chavrusa*, study partner, in Telshe Stone first alerted me to the significance of the infamous 1190 York pogrom. He has something of a personal connection with the affair, or at least with a related event that occurred subsequently in modern times.

As a young man from a nonobservant family that had survived the Holocaust, he actually attended the University of York without knowing that British rabbis had centuries before placed a *cherem*, a prohibition, on Jews residing in the city of York. He told me how his grandmother was appalled to hear that he was going to York. "They kill Jews there, you know." When my *chavrusa* reassured her: "Granny, that was eight hundred years ago," she replied, "Some things never change!"

My *chavrusa* once even performed with the university orchestra in York Minster, the cathedral which was the subject of a very mysterious fire early in the morning on July 9, 1984, following reburial, the day before, of Jewish bones which, by some accounts, could have included victims of the twelfth-century massacre. The interesting aspect of this fire was that the part of the cathedral that was extensively damaged was the pre-thirteenth-century section.

My *chavrusa* clearly recalls watching spectacular lightning storms light the sky above York the night before the fire. It was reported that the medieval cathedral was struck by lightning and it took more than 120 firefighters to bring the blaze under control. Only many years later, when he was living in Israel as an observant Jew, did my *chavrusa* hear the full story of the events leading up to this dramatic finale of an almost eight-hundred-year saga.

Ghastly Events of 1190 The ghastly chain of events in York in 1190, which led to the rabbis placing a *cherem* against Jews living within the walls of that city, became the most notorious example of anti-Semitism in medieval England. By no means, however, was it an isolated incident. The York massacre was the climax of a tide of murderous violence that had swept the country in the early part of 1190, when ignorant mobs were incited by the leaders of the impending Crusades to pillage and massacre whole Jewish communities. Nobles envious of Jewish wealth, landowners who owed money to the Jews, the zealous clergy — all these conspired to eradicate the Jews.

In September 1189, thirty Jews were massacred at the coronation of King Richard I (the Lionheart), at Westminster. Crusaders on a rampage killed fifty-seven Jews at Bury St. Edmunds on March 18, 1190, just two days after the York killings. Jews were slain at Lynn, at Stamford fair, and at Norwich around the same time; and the Jews of Lincoln escaped only by taking refuge in a castle.

The coronation murders occurred after two prominent Jews had arrived uninvited at Westminster Abbey, bringing valuable gifts for the new king from the Jewish communities. An angry mob attacked them following a false rumor that the king had ordered death to the Jews. Fleeing to their stone houses for refuge, the Jews were faced by the threat of the straw roofs of their dwellings being set on fire. Many of those who tried to escape were butchered, although several committed suicide rather than face the other alternative of forced baptism. After twenty-four hours of rioting, the king stepped in to stop the disorder and had three of the instigators hanged. After all, Jews were useful to the crown not only for taxes, but as moneylenders. King Richard decreed that the

Jews were not to be further persecuted, but once he left for the Crusades the violence resumed.

Refuge in York Castle One of the Jews at Westminster, Benedict of York, who had chosen baptism to escape being killed, later recanted his conversion to Christianity but died of his wounds. He had been the York agent for a prominent Jewish banker, Aaron of Lincoln. In March 1190, his grieving widow and children were slain in their beds and his house ransacked. Led by Richard Malebisse, a York nobleman deeply in debt to Aaron of Lincoln, the rampaging mob then took advantage of a fire that had broken out elsewhere in York and commenced burning Jewish homes, supposedly in retaliation. The truth was that Malebisse and his cohorts divined a golden opportunity to erase their debts and their creditors in one savage stroke.

York boasted one of the largest Jewish communities of the period and it was a center of Torah learning, being home to some notable scholars. Afraid for their safety, the alarmed Jews gathered around their leader, Yosef (Josce) of York, and their chief rabbi and religious mentor, Yom Tov bar Yitzchak of Joigny, France, a liturgical poet and one of the celebrated Tosafists. They all took refuge in York Castle or the "great tower" (later named Clifford's Tower), a wooden keep built by William I in 1068, by the River Ouse. Permission was at first obtained from the warden, who complied because the Jews were under the direct protection of the king, but this dignitary soon left the scene to complain to the Sheriff of York, John Marshall, that the Jews had "cheated him."

When the warden tried to re-enter the tower together with the county militia, who had orders to evict the Jews from their refuge, he was refused admission for

fear of the mob now gathered around the tower walls. The siege continued for several days while preparations were being made to storm the castle and force the Jews out. The besiegers were incited by a vociferous monk who celebrated mass each morning in front of the tower, dressed in white robes. A stone fell (or was thrown) from the tower, killing him, and whipping the mob into a renewed frenzy. If the Jews left the tower they faced certain death, or at the very least, forced baptism.

It was now March 16, 1190 (7 Nisan 4950), *erev Shabbos HaGadol*, and the Jews were running short of food and water.

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The Only Way Out When the besieging throng set the citadel on fire, the venerable Rabbi Yom Tov of Joigny concluded that the only solution was for the Jews inside to take their own lives to avoid the greater sin of forced baptism. According to one account, Josce of York began the sad self-immolation when he slew his own beloved wife, Hannah, and their two children, with his *shechitah*, ritual slaughter, knife. He was then himself stabbed to death by Rabbi Yom Tov. (Another rendering has Josce as the last to die before the venerable rabbi.) The father of each family was given the overwhelming responsibility of killing the women and children of his household before himself being killed by Rabbi Yom Tov, who, finally, by stabbing himself, became the only one of the group to actually die by his own hand.

A handful of Jews chose to accept what proved to be false promises of baptism if they gave themselves up. When



Jewbury Street today in what is described by the photographer as "... a deeply unloved part of the city, crossed by a busy road." The lamp-post bears the road sign "Jewbury" with Sainsbury's car park across the road, site of the crypt containing the bones of York medieval Jews dug up during construction work

Picture courtesy Dave Fayt

they left the castle at daybreak on March 17, they were immediately killed. One narrative records that most of the bodies of dead Jews were burned in the fire that engulfed the citadel. But by all accounts, the massacre had effectively wiped out nearly the entire Jewish population of the City of York, some 150 souls according to a nineteenth-century writer, Ephraim of Bonn.

The matter did not end there. The nobles involved had one aim in mind from the start and that was to erase their debts to the Jews. Moving on to York Minster, where documents were kept in the treasury, they forced the authorities to hand over all records of debts owed to Jews, which were promptly burned.

Some form of retribution did finally come to the perpetrators when William de Longchamp, the king's chancellor and acting ruler of the kingdom in Richard's absence, heard of the incident. Much annoyed at this affront to royal dignity, he marched to York, dismissed the sheriff and constable for failing to prevent the massacre, and imposed heavy fines on fifty-two of the chief citizens of York. He also banished Richard Malebisse and several other nobles to Scotland.

Reminder of York's Darkest Hour and a Healing Gesture The timber keep of York Castle itself was badly damaged by fire during the siege and restored

between 1190 and 1194. Between 1245 and 1265, the castle was again rebuilt and raised to its present height and is still extant as the stone castle, Clifford's Tower. Excavations at the site in 1902 and 1903 revealed charred beams thirteen feet below the surface, as a reminder of the terror of fire faced by the trapped Jews.

In 1978, as a healing gesture, a plaque was laid a short way down the slope in front of the tower in the presence of the chief rabbi of England, Lord (then Dr.) Immanuel Jakobovits; the Archbishop of York; and a descendent of Richard Malebisse, the leader of the mob that carried out the massacre. It bears this short, sad reminder of York's blackest hour:

"On the night of Friday 16 March 1190, some 150 Jews and Jewesses of York, having sought protection in the Royal Castle on this site from the mob incited by Richard Malebisse and others, chose to die at each other's hands rather than renounce their faith."

This statement is followed by a quote in Hebrew from *Isaiah* 42:12: "Let them honor G-d and declare His praise in the isles."

In more recent years, several developers' proposals to build a supermarket near the site have been vigorously resisted by the City of York Castle Area Campaign, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Union of Jewish Students, and other orga-

The next purportedly connected event, a mysterious lightning strike on York Minster Cathedral, took place in the early hours of the following day



Clifford's Tower today, showing the memorial plaque recording the tragic event of 1190

Picture courtesy of York Castle Area Campaign

nizations. The Castle Area Campaign has also been active in maintaining the site and plaque. A field of daffodils (considered an appropriate flower because the petals take the form of a six-pointed star) was planted in 1993 as a memorial to what they describe as a "potent reminder of religious and racial intolerance — an educative force in an unstable world."

Despite conciliatory gestures such as the one recorded above, York remains a city that most Jews avoid. It is said that devout Jews who happen to travel by train through the city even desist from eating their sandwiches. The latest available population figures show only 191 Jews living in York, out of a total population of 181,094, about one-tenth of one percent!

It is somewhat ironic and perhaps even significant to note that the world's largest concentration of Jews in a single city today exists in the city of New York.

Laying the York Bones to Rest The chain of events which led to the eventual laying to rest of the bones of Jews from medieval York reads something like a bestselling thriller. A full account was published in the chareidi online magazine *Dei'ah VeDibur* on October 8, 2003 (12 Tishrei 5764). The writer, Rabbi Dov Eliach, obtained his story from the Gateshead *avreich*, Rabbi Yisroel Chaim Levine.

In brief, the story goes that in 1984, Rabbi Levine, on his way back to Manchester, was forced to change trains at York. Recalling the York massacre and the fact that certain Tosafists were involved, and with several hours on his hands, he sought out the tourist information booth to ask if there was a Jewish cemetery in the city. He was surprised to be told by the information clerk that several months earlier an ancient Jewish graveyard had indeed been discovered and that "hundreds of skeletons" had been carted off to the archaeology department at the University of York. He went first to the site of the dig, near an intended parking garage development, and found nothing. Proceeding to the university, he presented himself to the archaeologists there as "a researcher of Jewish law" (as he was a notable *avreich* studying Gemara, this was certainly not beyond the bounds of credibility).

Rabbi Levine was assured that permission, necessary by British law, had been obtained from the chief rabbi of London to perform the dig at the site, adjacent to "Jewbury" Street. Professor Terry O'Connor of the Department of Archaeology, University of York, has recently confirmed to us that the excavation was undertaken by York Archaeological Trust, under the terms of the Cemeteries Act — and the then-newly

THE TOSAFISTS OF YORK

In addition to the notable Rabbi Yom Tov bar Yitzchak of Joigny, several other Tosafists are claimed to have been among the Jews who died tragically in London in 1189 and in York in 1190. One of these was Rabbi Eliyahu HaKadosh, a pupil of Rabbi Yitzchak HaZaken, who died at York, while Rabbi Yaakov of Orleans was said to have died a martyr's death in the anti-Jewish London riots of 1189.

Rabbi Yom Tov himself was a former pupil of Rashi's grandson, Rabbeinu Tam, and the epithet "HaKodesh" was frequently added to his name. He also was a Biblical exegete and a liturgical poet, his best-known work being *Omnam Kein*, a hymn sung on Yom Kippur. In one of the few contemporary accounts of the York tragedy, Ephraim of Bonn described Rabbi Yom Tov as a "person of no ordinary qualifications" and recorded the words of his final speech to the York *beis din*, which began: "Men of Israel! The G-d of our ancestors is Omniscient, and there is no one who can say 'Why doest Thou this?' This day He commands us to die for His law; for that law which we have cherished from the first hour it was given, which we have preserved pure throughout our captivity in all nations, and which, for the many consolations it has given us and the eternal hope it communicates, can we do less than die? ..."

It has been said that it was mainly because of the cruel death of these notables that the *cherem* of York, the tradition in England of forbidding Jews to sleep in the City of York overnight, was proclaimed.



Picture courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of York Minster

York Minster cathedral on fire July 9, 1984

enacted Disused Burial Grounds Act — after a number of human skeletons were uncovered within an area that would be destroyed by the planned building work. He told us that “although the work was undertaken completely within the law and in consultation with all appropriate bodies (including the London *beis din*), any excavation of human remains is contentious, and it was accomplished with minimal publicity.”

The Human Remains Report, Appendix 3, of the National Heritage Act of 1983, states that for some cultures, and specifically Judaism, “the sanctity of human remains is paramount” and that “the response of the Jewish community to the excavation at Jewbury (the Jewish cemetery in York) was one of shocked outrage accompanying demands for immediate reburial and cessation of further archaeological activity.”

Some Early Doubts Following some early doubts, one of the factors pointing towards a Jewish graveyard was its surprising orderliness, with the children buried on the outer perimeter of the site, as per ancient Jewish practice. Most non-Jewish cemeteries of the period were generally laid out in haphazard fashion. Professor R.B. Dobson of the University of York, provided a useful piece of evidence when he produced an ancient deed of sale, in Latin, that he had found in the York Library. This determined that the land in question had once been sold to the Jewish community of York.

The cemetery was apparently first used around 1177 and remained in use until the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290. The remains of nearly five-hundred individuals were recovered for anthropological analysis; the results represent the only detailed study of a medieval Jewish population from England. The average height for males

was 5'5" and females 5'1" — somewhat shorter than the normal average for Christians of the time.

A Proper Jewish Burial On his return to Gateshead, Rabbi Levine immediately began to work on the matter of having the bones suitably re-interred. He called Rabbi Chanoch Ehrentrau, who was later to become *av beis din* of London, and also enlisted the aid of other well-known *rabbanim*, including Rabbi Eliyahu Falk.

Lord Immanuel Jacobovits, then Chief Rabbi of England, eventually arranged with the British Ministry of the Interior to have all digging stopped and to bring all the bones to a proper Jewish burial, with the construction company involved at the original site funding the operation. According to Professor O'Connor: “The bones from Jewbury were removed temporarily to a Jewish mortuary in Manchester (apparently it was the closest appropriate facility). There they stayed while building work continued on the former cemetery site, a period of around 5 to 6 months.”

In the final report on the excavation in the journal *Antiquity* (March 1, 1995), the noted York University archaeologist Philip Rahtz gives the date of reburial as July 8, 1984 (8 Tamuz 5744). A stone plaque was placed at the entrance to the site, now a Sainsbury's supermarket, with Hebrew and English inscriptions recording the location of the Jewish cemetery and that the human remains were re-interred on the site of the present parking lot in the presence of the chief rabbi and representatives of the Jewish community.

Supervised by the *rabbanim* present, the hundreds of skeletons were buried in several dozen coffins arranged in three layers in a “crypt” constructed within the new building as close as was practicable to their original burial place. In addition to the memorial stone, a sign was set up to warn Kohanim not to enter the building. It remains conjecture as to whether any of the remains re-entombed in 1984 were actually from the victims of the 1190 tragedy.

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Fiery Retribution or Coincidence? The Mysterious York Minster Fire On July 9, 1984, around 2 a.m., just hours after the bones of medieval Jews of York had finally been laid to rest, a massive fire destroyed the only part of the historic York Minster Cathedral which dates back to the time of the infamous 1190 York pogrom.

July 8, 1984, was described at the time as having been a warm summer's day and the spectacular lightning storms that lit up the night sky over York came as something of a surprise. The BBC, North Yorkshire, reported that the cathedral's superintendent of works believed that a freak lightning strike started the fire. The fire alarm was not activated, probably due to electrical damage to the system, and by the time an on-duty policeman discovered the fire, York's famous old cathedral was well and truly ablaze.

The dry oak tinder in the roof of the South Transept burned quickly, much stonework was seriously damaged, and the famous sixteenth-century Rose Window was shattered into thousands of fragments. It took four years to complete the repairs at a cost of £1 million.

More than a few observers have viewed this incident, not as a coincidence, but as a possible demonstration of some kind of Divine retribution relating to the sad events of eight-hundred years before visited upon one of the biggest Gothic cathedrals in all of Europe. ■