Anti-Semitism in Medieval Europe

- **Anti-Semitism** is prejudice toward, discrimination against, or persecution of Jews.
- **Prejudice** is the suspicion or hatred of a particular group, such as a race or religion.
- **Discrimination** is the unfair treatment of people because they belong to a particular group.
- **Persecution** is intentionally making someone suffer.

The word *anti-Semitism* was first used in Germany in the late 1800s to refer to the false idea that Jews were a race that was physically and morally inferior to other races. Today, the word is used to refer to all hatred against Jews and Judaism, before and after the late 1800s.

In medieval Europe, anti-Semitism was more closely connected to religion than to race. It was hard for many medieval Christians to understand why Jews did not believe in the divinity of Jesus like they did, especially because Jesus was Jewish. Some argued that the best explanation was that Jews worked for the Devil. Also, many Christians believed that Jews in their country were guilty for killing Jesus even though he was crucified by Romans hundreds of years earlier. Finally, even though there were many different kingdoms in medieval Europe, people believed they were all part of Christendom – a civilization defined by belief in Christianity and obedience to the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, many people saw Jews as outsiders who did not belong in their country. It is important to note that the Catholic Church and most other Christian groups today reject these beliefs and teach that tolerance of others is an important virtue.

1. In your own words, explain the difference between prejudice and discrimination. How can prejudice lead to discrimination or persecution?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________________

2. How was medieval anti-Semitism different from the anti-Semitism in late 19th century Germany?

__________________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________________

Anti-Semitic beliefs caused many restrictions to be placed on Jews. For example, Jews were often prohibited from owning land and were only allowed to work in certain professions. Because lending money was one of the few professions open to Jews, a new anti-Semitic belief that Jews were greedier than other people emerged. Some people today still believe this myth. In the early 13th century, the Church issued a decree that Jews had to wear special clothes so they could be easily identified. In some places, Jews were not allowed to live with Christians. Instead, they had to live in special areas of the city called ghettos. These ghettos were often overcrowded, impoverished, and had walls with gates that were locked at night and during Christian holidays. When the gates were locked, Jews were not allowed outside of the ghetto.

In addition to legal restrictions, anti-Semitic beliefs also caused great violence against Jews. During the crusades, many Jewish communities were destroyed and many Jews were killed. Originally, the crusades were a series of military expeditions to the Eastern Mediterranean because Europeans believed that God wanted them to conquer the “Holy Land” where Jesus had lived. Muslim armies had captured this area from Christian rulers centuries earlier. Some
Crusaders believed that God wanted them to kill all non-Christians, so they attacked European Jews. Scholars estimate that between one-quarter and one-third of the Jews in northern France and Germany were killed during the First Crusade. It is important to note that even though Church teachings helped fuel these massacres, the Church spoke out against these attacks and many bishops tried to protect Jews in their communities.

Jews also faced violence because they were often scapegoated, or unfairly blamed, for tragedies and natural disasters. For example, many people falsely blamed Jews for the Bubonic Plague which killed millions of people. If a child disappeared, Jews were sometimes accused of murdering the child. These false accusations often led to attacks on Jewish communities.

Jews were expelled, or forced to leave, many European countries. When they were forced to leave, the king often took Jewish property. Greed played a role in the expulsions, and anti-Semitism made Jews easy targets. Between the 11th and 19th centuries Jews were expelled at least 34 times from major Christian cities and states. The most notorious example of these expulsions was in 1492 when Jews in Spain were given the choice of converting to Christianity, leaving the country, or being killed.

3. How are medieval European ghettoes similar to modern American ghettoes? How are they different?
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

4. Why do you think Jews were scapegoated?
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________

The Jewish experience with anti-Semitism has influenced Jewish culture. For example, fighting intolerance is an important Jewish value in part because Jews have been victims of intolerance. Prejudice and discrimination continue to be problems today. By speaking out against intolerance, people of any age can help create a better society.

5. Identify at least three groups that face prejudice or discrimination today. Have you seen anyone experience discrimination? When?
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________