**The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349**

In 1348 there appeared in Europe a devastating plague which is reported to have killed off ultimately twenty-five million people. By the autumn of that year there was a rumour that the deaths were due to an international conspiracy of Jewry to poison Christendom. It was reported that the leaders in the Jewish city of Toledo in Spain had initiated the plot and that one of the chief conspirators was a Rabbi Peyret who had his headquarters in Chambéry, Savoy, whence he dispatched his poisoners to France, Switzerland, and Italy.

As a result, a number of the Jews who lived on the shores of Lake Geneva, were arrested, tortured and, as a result, confessed to anything their torturers suggested they had done. Records of these confessions were sent from one town to another in Switzerland and down the Rhine River into Germany. As a result, thousands of Jews, in at least two hundred towns and hamlets, were butchered and burnt. They were falsely accused of having caused and spread the Black Death e.g. by poisoning water in wells.

**The Confession of Agimet:**

He confesses further that he put some of this poison into the public fountain of the city of Toulouse and in the wells that are near the [Mediterranean] sea. Asked if at the time that he scattered the venom and poisoned the wells, above mentioned, any people had died, he said that he did not know inasmuch as he had left everyone of the above mentioned places in a hurry.

In the city of Strasbourg there were people who owed the Jewish community money. They were quite keen to get rid of the Jews so they did not have to repay and also have competition from Jewish businesses. They were more than happy to see the Jews killed to keep the plague away. The city councillors did not want to kill the Jews and so people marched on the town hall, overthrew the council and replaced them with people who were prepared to carry out the murders. The Jews were killed and later that year the Black Death arrived and killed an estimated 16000 people within the city itself.

**THE JEWS ARE BURNT AT STRASBOURG**

On Saturday - that was St. Valentine's Day- they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform. There were about two thousand of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled and the Jews had to surrender all their property. Their wealth was divided among the Christian men.

**Think!**

* How powerful was fear and rumour in 1348-9? Why?
* Why were the Jews singled out for hatred?
* How reliable is torture as a means of getting evidence?
* What did ordinary people do in extraordinary times?
* Can you think of any more modern examples of similar behaviour?

*These terrible crimes against Jewish people did not happen in England. Any idea why?*

The answer to the last Q is because Jewish people had already been expelled from England in 1290. Jewish communities were allowed again in the 1650s. The questions have powerful resonance today.