

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF OUTREACH AND CONVERSION IN JUDAISM

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There have been much more conversion and outreach to Judaism in the past than the conventional picture implies. The lack of interest that has been predominant since the late Middle Ages is only a limited phase in a long history of cycles of isolation and outreach. We may now be entering into a new historic era of outreach.

The notion of conversion to Judaism that has predominated in the last few centuries is that it must be passive and even reluctant: if people make their way to Judaism by themselves and in utter sincerity and reject the warning concerning the lowly status of the Jewish people in the world, those people are to be graciously accepted. But there is evidence that there was far more conversion and outreach to Judaism in the past than the conventional picture implies and that the withdrawn, disinterested approach is only a more recent phase in a much longer history (Seltzer, 1988).

Outreach in Jewish history is at the same time narrower and broader than formal conversion. As the term has come to be used recently, outreach is a turning to individuals who are not Jews according to the Jewish law to invite them to become Jews, to convince them of the desirability of such a step, and to facilitate their acceptance in the Jewish community. Outreach may not be missionizing in the traditional Christian sense, but it is more receptive and positive in its orientation than what is taken to be the usual Jewish attitude to Gentiles.

Defining the relationship between conversion and outreach in the narrow sense is not the only conceptual problem faced by Jewish historians. Outreach can have a

broader, open-ended meaning, viewed in the context of changing definitions of the boundaries and the gateways between the Jewish people and the larger social worlds it occupied in various eras. Even before the inception of formal conversion, there was a more drawn-out mode of assimilating non-Israelites into the people of Israel. Ruth's insistence that the home of her late husband's mother was to become her true home and that the place where Naomi was to be buried was the place where she wanted to be buried was accompanied by her fervent assertion that she desired membership in the people of Israel and would worship its God. The biblical text expresses nothing but admiration for Ruth; the story concludes by noting that Ruth was a direct ancestor of Jesse, father of King David. Regardless of the precise historicity of the tale, it indicates that the gradual, informal integration of such a worthy, devoted, pious Moabitess into the people of Israel was a live option and a desirable possibility in biblical times.

Such absorption was part of the prophetic vision during the great events of redemption at the end of the Babylonian exile. The sixth-century BCE prophet whom we call Second Isaiah explicitly refers to "foreigners who join themselves to the Lord"; their offerings are to be accepted at God's altar as a sign that God's house will be "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56: 3-7). These joiners will be gathered up in the exile along with the outcasts of Israel and brought

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back to the land of Israel. Does this mean the the exilic generation actually engaged in outreach? Yehezkel Kaufmann (1970) argues cogently that mass conversion of the Gentiles in biblical prophecy was eschatological, not practical—a grand visionary idea associated with the End of Days, but just an idea. Yet, ideas as such precede their reality.

By the second century BCE, formal conversion was unquestionably a widespread practice in Judaism, not only in the Diaspora but also through physical coercion in the land of Israel under the Hasmonean rulers who forced Idumeans and others to become Jews. Between Second Isaiah and the Hasmonean kings and Diaspora outreachers, we have the late biblical account of Ezra's uncompromising injunctions in the mid-fifth century BCE that Israelites put aside all their non-Israelite wives, regardless of religious behavior or loyalty. The silence of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah concerning procedures by which the worthy and pious among these women could be formally accepted among the Judaites indicates the nonexistence of such procedures in an era of closing ranks and sharpening boundaries; the main preoccupation was re-establishing the purity of the "holy seed" in a mood of contrition for the sins of that generation and of their ancestors. (There is no indication, by the way, that Ezra's strictures were carried out to the degree and in the manner that he demanded.)

From the fifth century BCE to the first century BCE and first century CE, Jewish leadership moved from the separatist policy espoused by Ezra and Nehemiah to the friendly attitude to proselytes mentioned by such writers as the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo, the Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman historian Tacitus, the author of the New Testament book of Matthew (see Matthew 23:15) and attributed in the Talmud to the sage Hillel (see Babli Shabbat 31a).

One of the key methodological problems in reconstructing the history of conversion

in Judaism is to define the cycles of isolation and outreach in Jewish history. Clearly, the conversionist drive has been tied both to forces internal to the history of Judaism and to forces impinging from without—to a series of long-range dynamic processes that made conversion only a theoretical possibility in some eras and an actuality in others. In the rest of this article, three clusters of problems are presented that require special clarification for a future history of Jews-by-Choice, the joiners in each generation.

CONVERSION IN LATE ANTIQUITY

First, there are questions dealing with conversion to Judaism in late antiquity when the impulse was especially fervent. How was the Jewish outreach of the Hellenistic and Roman periods related to the emergence of multiple forms of Judaism in the late Second Temple period? Which groups spearheaded it? Did the translation of the Bible into Greek (the Septuagint) in the third century BCE spur outreach in the Diaspora to non-Jews in the eastern Mediterranean? How important as a source of proselytes were the so-called *sebominoi*, the "God-fearers" who were said to have been attracted to the singular Jewish deity and to have adopted some Jewish practices, but who did not—or had not yet—become full-fledged members of the people of Israel (*Biblical Archeological Review*, 1986)? We know the three primary elements of conversion according to early rabbinic practice: *tevilah* (ritual immersion, baptism), *milah* (circumcision), and the offering of a special sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. What was required in the Diaspora of such converts? In Judea did the Sadducees, the priestly party, oppose outreach and the Pharisees support it? Although the Pharisees were bitterly critical of the later Hasmonean kings for their cruelty and religious perversions, there is no indication that the royal conversionist policies came under attack. Did the rise of apocalyptic fanaticism spur conversion, or (more

likely) did such groups as the Essenes, preoccupied with the end of history, turn away from efforts to bring Jewish monotheism to the Gentiles? Did the Jewish wars against the Romans in the first and second centuries inhibit the pace of proselytism or (as the sources seem to indicate) make little difference?

In the Talmud there is an indication that significant numbers of conversions to Judaism continued to occur until the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, when the Christian emperors issued legislation against it (Bamberger, 1968; Braude, 1940; Nock, 1933; Rosenbloom, 1978). If conversion to Judaism continued to be prevalent, why exactly did Christianity win far more converts than Judaism in the 250 years during which they were more or less on the same footing? Christianity began as a Jewish sect, and the early Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem were possessed by apocalyptic fervor. Yet Christianity spread more successfully among Hellenized Jews and pagans in the Diaspora than among Judean Jews and even more rapidly among pagans than among Jews anywhere. Were the aforementioned *sebominoi* a crucial element in the early expansion of Christianity? There are other comparative questions too. An individual went through a conversion in the form of an initiation ritual when entering a pagan mystery cult; Jewish and Christian conversion have as a common theme that the convert is born anew. What were the theological, sociological, and psychological differences between Jewish and Christian conversion on the one hand and conversion to pagan religions on the other, and between initiation into the Christian mysteries and acceptance into *Knesset Yisrael*, the Jewish people?

CONVERSION IN THE MIDDLE AGES

A second area of special interest is conversion to Judaism in the early Middle Ages when Jews were adapting to life in king-

doms and states that had as their official religions one of Judaism's two daughter religions, Christianity or Islam. Recently Norman Golb (1987) of the University of Chicago has shown that the era of active Jewish conversionism lasted much longer than has been suspected. He concludes that "we may perceive, from the variety of texts available, that Jewish proselytism in the early Middle Ages was a phenomenon that can be traced from the ninth century onwards, and seems to have reached its apogee in the eleventh century" (Golb, 1987, p. 36). Not a few of these converts whose stories have come down to us in Jewish and Christian chronicles were monks attracted to the Jewish faith because of their study of the Old Testament; they then settled in Muslim lands where conversion from Christianity to Judaism was not prohibited (although conversion from Islam to Judaism was). On the basis of the materials in the Cairo Genizah, Golb (1987) goes so far as to estimate that 15,000 men and women fled Europe to become Jewish converts in the Islamic world between 1000 and 1200. There was also conversion to Judaism on the frontier between the urban civilized world and the barbarian wilderness—the Judaizing of the Khazars, a Turkish people living on the steppe frontier of Eastern Europe. In his careful analysis of Hebrew epistles purporting to be a correspondence between the Khazar king and certain Spanish Jews, Golb concludes that "a genuine, widespread proselytized rabbinic Judaism was implanted in Khazaria in the ninth and tenth centuries" (Golb, 1987, p. 47).

If Jewish outreach remained vigorous until the 12th century, how can we account for the petering out of this extended conversionist impulse in the High Middle Ages after 1200? To be sure, it had been a capital crime since the fourth century for a Christian to convert to Judaism in Christian lands (and a Muslim in Islamic lands). Did a tightening up of the political systems in the Christian Diaspora make it

noticeably less likely that a convert and his Jewish mentors could avoid punishment? Did heightened Christian aggressiveness against Jews from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries—missionizing, public disputations, social and economic segregation, expropriation, and expulsions—make Jewish authorities fearful of the practical consequences of encouraging or even condoning conversion? Gershom Scholem repeatedly argued that the Kabbalah was the major element in preserving Jewish morale in the early modern era when other Jewish theologues, such as Aristotelian philosophy, had lost their appeal. The Kabbalah refers to proselytes with respect, but ascribes a second-class status to them. Did a mystical distancing from the outside social world contribute to banking the flames of Jewish proselytizing? In contrast to the Kabbalistic conception that the Jewish people occupy a distinctly different metaphysical status than other peoples was the tendency among some Jewish thinkers, especially from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to view Christianity as a legitimately monotheistic religion for Gentiles rather than as a form of idolatry. Did this tolerance also inhibit the impulse to reach out?

In the formation of the later attitude, perhaps the most crucial long-range issue is the role of ethnicity, so powerful a force in maintaining Jewish consciousness. Yet, ethnicity is, in the last analysis, a variable and not a constant: not only its intensity but also its nature and parameters differ from age to age and land to land. Were Jews of the early modern era, especially in Eastern Europe, that much more ethnically self-aware because of the nature of their social and linguistic distinctiveness (a view articulated by some Jewish historians)? How great a role did ethnicity play in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish attitudes to outreach, or does the combination of continued legal prohibitions, anti-Semitic attitudes, and social stigma constitute a sufficient explanation for the relatively few proselytes who appear in the

historical record? (One should note, however, that conversions to Judaism continue to occur regularly in every century down to modern times.)

OUTREACH IN MODERN JEWRY

A third area of questions concerns the mix of factors affecting outreach in modern Western Jewry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We seem to be entering a new era of Jewish proselytizing, resembling the Hellenistic and Roman eras and the early Middle Ages, rather than the centuries since. When legal sanctions against conversion to Judaism ceased to exist in Europe and the United States, the explosive force of modern anti-Semitism continued to sustain the negative valence of Jewishness in the eyes of many Gentiles who might have been attracted to the Jewish religion. The nineteenth-century concept of the "Mission of Israel," articulated by Reform, Neo-Orthodox, and Positive-Historical thinkers alike, provided a rationale for outreach, but no practical program. Biting criticism of the ethereal notion of a positive yet passive mission in the Diaspora to spread pure ethical monotheism was one of the motifs of Zionist thought at the end of the nineteenth century. The social idealism of Eastern European Jewish ideologies was grounded in the aspirations of secular nationalism and the goal of collective Jewish self-emancipation. Leaders of political and cultural Zionism and most other forms of Jewish nationalism were agnostic, if not actually antireligious, so that formal religious conversion did not find a place on their agenda of issues. In effect, it did not exist for them.

Militant secularism has disappeared, but the Zionist revolution within modern Jewry has resulted in a far more positive evaluation of the rich texture of Jewish historical culture than among modern nineteenth-century Jews. In general, American culture since the 1960s has exhibited a more appreciative attitude to

ethnic elements in personal identity, to tradition as such, and to the virtues of religious faith. Clearly, the precipitating cause leading to a shift in Jewish attitudes has been the swift rise in the rate of intermarriage. Contemporary intermarriage, which can be viewed as a sign of the social acceptability of Jews among Gentiles, is a threat to Jewish survival, to be sure. But as Egon Mayer (1985, p. 286) has pointed out, "Intermarriage itself rarely leads to assimilation" but to a variety of patterns. Intermarriage may hold an opportunity all its own because it creates, like the *sebmoinoi* of the Hellenistic and Roman eras, a population that contains individuals who are gradually Judaizing. The context for born Jews and potential new Jews, therefore, has shifted drastically since the late 1940s. Were it not for frictions between the Jewish religious denominations in the Diaspora and blatant hostility of religious authorities in Israel to Reform and Conservative Judaism, we would be well into a new historic era of outreach. Indeed, even with these frictions and hostilities we probably have entered this new era.

The necessary, if not the sufficient, element of the novel situation we face today is not intermarriage in itself, but rising intermarriage at a time when the essential differences between Jews-by-Birth and Jews-by-Choice are disappearing. In our American milieu, the vast majority of Jews are Jews-by-Choice in one way or another. The inertia of traditionalist culture and the force of anti-Semitism will not suffice to maintain the Jewishness of most Diaspora Jews. Living Jewishly means deciding to be Jewish in some meaningful way—participating in Jewish affairs, determining to create a Jewish home, committing oneself to the acquisition of Jewish learning in a synagogue education program or in Jewish studies courses at a university or in some other manner. The crucial decision can occur at almost any time in one's mature years and is not unlike an adult conversion experience. If being Jewish is more in-

dividualized, voluntary, and self-determined than ever before, the situation of the Jew-by-Choice is no longer the exception but the rule. The contemporary challenge, then, to our movements and our leaders is to respond in an appropriately nuanced manner to adapt Judaism to the changes that history, especially modern history, continues to force on us.

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