

*The Determination of Jewish Identity
below the Mason-Dixon Line:
Crossing the Boundary From Gentile to Jew
in the Nineteenth-Century American South*

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Introduction

Jewish identity in the United States has been transformed in a number of ways under the unique social and religious influences of American society.¹ Indeed, the very concept of what a Jew was gradually changed over the course of time. This included even the Jewish understanding of what it meant to become a Jew and how one converted to Judaism. As American Jews changed their conception of Jewish religious and cultural identity, they also adapted this new image to their expectations of a person adopting Judaism through the process of conversion. The act of crossing the boundary and becoming a Jew was frequently a long process that occurred over the course of years, rather than an abrupt event. This was true throughout the United States, including the southern states. The South had its own unique societal structure and forms of religious identification. Jews living in this region, both before and after the Civil War, adapted their religious and ethnic identity to conform to the expectations of southern society.² And yet, the religious adaptations made by most local Jewish communities in the South did not differ radically from those in the North. This article will investigate the unique dynamics underlying conversion to Judaism in the nineteenth century South, point out certain features and trends, and will attempt to analyze a few specific cases in the context of the sociology of southern religion.

Conversion to Judaism in America

In the Biblical period there was no clearly defined way for a non-Jew to become a Jew. The best-known account of this phenomenon is, of course, the Book of Ruth. When Ruth informs her mother-in-law that she is determined to follow Naomi back home, this early proselyte declares, 'your people are my

¹ The author would like to thank Mark K. Bauman and anonymous readers for their close reading of the original manuscript. He would also like to thank the editors, Geza Vermes and Tessa Rajak, for their assistance in bringing the manuscript to publication.

² For a popular account of the Jews in the southern United States, see Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

people and your God is my God'.³ In the late second Temple period,⁴ a series of specific requirements began to develop. These requirements were *Kabbalat Mitzvot*, the commitment to the observance of the commandments. A male convert was obligated to undergo *brit milah*, ritual circumcision, and both men and women were obligated to undergo *tevilah*, immersion in a *mikvah*. While the Temple was standing, the convert was obligated to bring a sacrifice in the Temple and, at a certain point in the final stage of the conversion, had to be accepted by a *beit din*, a rabbinical court of three qualified legal scholars.⁵ Attitudes varied from extreme to extreme but on the whole there was a positive attitude towards proselytizing in the Greco-Roman world.⁶ Louis Feldman and a number of other scholars⁷ have argued that before the development of Christianity into a dominant world religion, Judaism was a very active and successful proselytizing religion. Indeed, Feldman states '... Jews continue to make converts in sizable numbers even after the advent of Christianity'.⁸

But with the institutionalization of Christianity⁹ as the official religion of the Roman Empire, it became increasingly difficult for Jews to proselytize publicly. During most of the medieval period the Jews were a persecuted minority in both Christian and Moslem countries. With the coming of the Enlightenment and Emancipation in Central and Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the social interaction between the Jew and modern society was inexorably altered. Inter-marriage rates began to rise and there existed a degree of flexibility in terms of decision-making concerning

³ *The Book of Ruth*, chapter 1, verse 16.

⁴ On Jewish missionary activity in the Second Temple period, see Scot McKnight, *A Light Among The Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). For a broader perspective, see Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

⁵ For a simple and clear description of the requirements for conversion, see Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1985), pp. 19–39. On the conversion ceremony itself, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 198–238. Also see Gary G. Porton, *The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 132–154.

⁶ On non-Jewish attitudes toward Jews and Judaism in the ancient world, see Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Towards the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁷ On Judaism's attitude towards other religions, see Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations That Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes toward Other Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). In addition to Feldman, see the arguments made by Cohen, Porton, Goodman, McKnight, Schiffman and others.

⁸ Lewis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 341.

⁹ The literature on conversion to Christianity is vast. To a great degree the concept of conversion in a Christian context is a fundamentally different concept than the conversion process discussed in this paper. On the theoretical framework for understanding conversion see Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993). For some first person accounts of conversions from Paul to Thomas Merton see Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, *Famous Conversions: The Christian Experience* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983).

one's religious identity. But many European countries—including those of central Europe—had laws restricting the rights of parents to make religious choices for their children in the event of intermarriage and it remained far more likely that a Jew would convert to Christianity rather than the reverse.

It was in America where this dynamic changed dramatically. The New World had left behind many of the societal restrictions of Europe and the freedom that was allowed and promoted generated a very different type of dynamic. While some Jews continued to convert to Christianity and others intermarried and allowed their children to be raised as Christians, there was also the very practical possibility for the non-Jewish partner to embrace Judaism. It was also possible for an individual driven by idealistic motives to convert to Judaism without any romantic intention. A similar pattern held true in other New World countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and Argentina, to name but a few.¹⁰ The interest in conversion for a gentile spouse was more likely due to the much freer atmosphere of the New World.

This presented the various Jewish congregations, rabbis, and communal leaders with the task of formulating a policy to respond to requests for conversion. In the Colonial period there were only five synagogues in all the colonies and in the early National period, just six. These congregations, located in New York, Philadelphia, Newport, Richmond, Charleston and Savannah, all followed the Spanish-Portuguese liturgical *Minhag*.¹¹

Jews and Judaism in the Nineteenth-Century South

Abraham Peck, of the American Jewish Historical society, has referred to nineteenth-century southern Judaism as 'that other peculiar institution'.¹² Peck argues that southern Jews created their own version of a myth of nobility, which paralleled that of their southern Christian neighbours. According to Peck, they did this in part because they were never—certainly throughout the nineteenth century—allowed to feel that they were an integral part of southern white society. Tolerated and subjected to very little overt discrimination or hostility, southern Jews were also not fully accepted as brothers and sisters.

Mark Bauman, of Atlanta Metropolitan College, takes a different position. Rather than suggesting that Jews became fully southern or that they created their own southern Judaism in response to their social segregation from other

¹⁰ For a comparative study of three of these communities as 'frontier' societies, see Daniel J. Elazar with Peter Medding, *Jewish Communities in Frontier Societies: Argentina, Australia, and South Africa* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1983).

¹¹ Jacob Rader Marcus refers to the years 1654–1800 in American Jewish history as the early Sephardic period. See his *An Introduction to Early American Jewish History* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, Magnes, 1971).

¹² Abraham J. Peck, 'That Other "Peculiar Institution": Jews and Judaism in the Nineteenth Century South', *Modern Judaism*, volume 7, number 1, February 1987, pp. 99–114. Also refer to his 'Between Myth and Reality—Jews and Judaism in the Nineteenth Century American South', *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, division b, volume 3 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), pp. 119–126.

southern whites, Bauman argues that southern Jews were ‘... influenced by the regional subculture in a relatively marginal fashion’.¹³ Bauman writes that where southern Jews were most influenced by their environment, the causal factors were ‘ecological’.¹⁴ Thus in his view there was very little that was unique in the Jewish experience in the southern United States. Rather, he argues, ‘... their experiences were far more similar to those of Jews in similar environments elsewhere in America than they were to white Protestants in the South.’¹⁵ The research presented in this article would tend to support Bauman’s argument. And yet this is not to discount the possibility of a far more complex series of influences and interactions.¹⁶

There are records of Jews having settled in the South as individuals long before the Revolution. The first organized Jewish community appears to have been that of Savannah, Georgia, which may date back to 1733. The community of Charleston, South Carolina dates from about 1750 and became the largest Jewish community in the United States circa 1800. The Richmond, Virginia Jewish community was the only one in the United States, North or South, to have founded a congregation in the early National period. Established in 1789, Ashkenazim were the majority from the very beginning. Many immigrant Jews from central Europe settled in the South after 1830. Most of them, like their co-religionists in the North, faced the immediate need of earning a living. Some worked as peddlers, while others established stores of various types. The southern plantation elite welcomed the Jewish immigrants from Germany, seeing in them a politically powerless substitute for the independent middle class that they feared could become an economic and political rival. That was why the plantation owners had deliberately prevented the emergence of a commercial class by importing both goods and services from outside the region. This may have been in part a deliberate strategy but it was also a consequence of the fact that direct trade with Britain was geographical and economically logical.¹⁷ The Jews therefore were able to fill a vital economic niche without threatening the power structure of the region. While antisemitism certainly existed, the level of hostility towards Jews was low, partially as a consequence of the racial division that was so prominent in southern society. This idyllic situation began to change during the Civil War

¹³ Mark K. Bauman, *The Southerner as American: Jewish Style* (Cincinnati: The American Jewish Archives, 1996), pg. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ There is an ongoing scholarly debate over what could be termed the question of the existence and the degree of ‘Southern Jewish distinctiveness.’ In addition to the work of Mark Bauman and Abraham Peck, also see Jerome A. Wolfe, ‘The Future of Jews in the South’, from Abraham D. Lavender (ed.), *Coat of Many Colors: Jewish Subcommunities in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1977), pp. 128–131; Stephen Whitfield, ‘The Braided Identity of Southern Jewry’, *American Jewish History* (March 1988), pp. 363–387; Howard N. Rabinowitz, ‘Nativism, Bigotry and Anti Semitism in the South’, *American Jewish History* (March 1988), pp. 437–451. The debate is more over questions of degree and emphasis rather than a definitive yes or no. Bauman’s view is generally accepted but many of the other interpretations can be seen as compatible with his positions, or at the very least, differing from his view in emphasis only.

¹⁷ Correspondence with Mark K. Bauman, March 13, 2000.

period. There were accusations of various types made against the Jews in the North as well as in the South, but as the war turned against the South, the pressure there became far greater than in the North.

Southern Judaism was, in most ways, similar to northern Judaism, but it was not identical. There was a strong tendency in the South for both cultural and religious conformity, and this put pressure on Jews to acculturate to southern models as much as possible.¹⁸ There were a number of important southern rabbis, but on the whole rabbinic leadership in the South was less dynamic than in the North.¹⁹ Congregations tended to be more conservative in the nineteenth century, and were therefore slower to adapt to the radicalism sweeping some northern congregations while in the twentieth century, they were slower to break away from Classical Reform and move toward Neo-Reform. Southern Jewish communities embraced reform but they did so as a vehicle for acculturation rather than dissention. But southern Judaism was by no means homogenous. Different groups responded in a range of ways, and there were regional variations as well.

The practice of Judaism in nineteenth century America changed slowly over the course of the century. The introduction of Reform is usually thought to have been brought over to America by the Central European Jewish immigrants who began arriving in the United States in the 1830s. These 'German Jews' were emigrating from the original area where Reform Judaism was developed, and so it was thought logical that they brought Reform Judaism to the New World with them. This has now been shown to be inaccurate since most central European immigrants came from small towns where they were not exposed to Reform Judaism. But, it is also a misleading impression because the very first American attempt to establish Reform had nothing to do with this wave of immigration. Rather, the first Reform group dated from December 1824 was established at Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina. A group of forty-seven congregants led by Isaac Harby²⁰ and calling itself, 'the Reformed Society of Israelites for promoting true principles of Judaism according to its purity and spirit,' petitioned to the board of Beth Elohim for a number of minor cosmetic reforms. The dissidents were not motivated by issues of *halachic* status, meaning that they were not intermarried and trying to find a way to gain acceptance of their spouses through conversion, or to insure the Jewish legitimacy of their children through the recognition of patrilineal descent. Rather, the leaders were intellectuals who believed that it was fit and proper to make Reforms in the form and substance of their religion as would be consistent with 'the present enlightened state of

¹⁸ See Stephen Whitfield, 'The Braided Identity of Southern Jewry', *American Jewish History* (March 1988), pp. 363–387.

¹⁹ For a general overview of this question see Malcolm Stern, 'The Role of the Rabbi in the South', from Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofski (eds.), *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville University Press of Virginia, for the American Historical Society, 1979), pp. 21–32.

²⁰ On Harby, see Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788–1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1994).

society'.²¹

Beth Elohim, like the other American Sephardic congregations, followed the Spanish and Portuguese ritual, which was, of course, entirely traditional in approach. This had been the practice at the Charleston congregation since its founding in 1749. Harby and his supporters wanted changes in the Sabbath service, primarily that English prayers be added to the Hebrew prayers, both to give a translation, and to reflect the religious situation of the Jews in contemporary America. They also wanted the services shortened, and a sermon delivered in English. When the board of the congregation rejected their request, they seceded from the congregation and an attempt was made to start their own congregation. The Reformed Society of Israelites wrote and used their own prayer book, and made a number of other changes. Unfortunately, Harby left Charleston in 1827 for New York, and a couple of the other central leaders also left Charleston. Within a number of years, their fledgling religious group fell apart. Nevertheless, Congregation Beth Elohim adopted Reform shortly thereafter. Eventually, many of the members of the Reformed Society of Israelites rejoined Beth Elohim. But when a fire destroyed the synagogue in 1838, thirty eight members of Beth Elohim requested that, 'an organ be erected in the synagogue to assist in the vocal part of the service.' The board rejected the proposal, but those in favour were able to call for a general meeting of the congregation.

According to the by-laws of the congregation's institution, two-thirds vote of the congregants was needed to reverse a decision such as this. Those in favour of the organ were able to muster the necessary votes and Beth Elohim became the first synagogue in America to install an organ. With the support of the formerly Orthodox minister, Gustavus Poznanski, other changes were made, including confirmation, one-day observance of festivals, and later mixed seating of men and women. The traditionalists eventually formed their own congregation called Shearith Israel. Although this religious development was not directly caused by anything connected with intermarriage or the desire to bring those born as non-Jews into the congregation, the commitment to Americanization obviously had an implication that American Judaism needed to develop in a way that would be appropriate for American Jews and potentially other Americans. The changes in Beth Elohim—one of the original Sephardic congregations—foreshadowed further substantive changes in American Judaism that would have far-reaching implications.

This episode is a fascinating one, but it was not typical of the reasons for ritual changes in the South anymore than it was in the North. The Charleston Group pushed for Reform much earlier than anywhere else did in the United States, and were intellectually more sophisticated than most of the later efforts. Typically, the central European immigrants who arrived during the 1830s, 1840s, or 1850s gradually adapted to American practices and norms. As the adaptation process was occurring, they began to desire certain specific changes in ritual practice and expectations. Reforms were usually justified on

²¹ *The Constitution of the Reformed Society of Israelites for Promoting True Principles of Judaism According to its Purity and Spirit* (Charleston, South Carolina, B. Levy, 1825).

practical rather than theoretical grounds. For example, many wanted some German and later English in the service so that they could better understand what was going on. Some wanted the service shortened because they found a long service excessively boring, or because they had to rush back to their businesses.

Southern Jews—like their northern co-religionists—wanted their synagogues to fit into the community. They wanted the respect of their Christian neighbours, and hoped that their synagogue could become a respected symbol of Judaism in the local environment. As the Jewish immigrants became more familiar with the norms accepted in Christian southern circles, they wanted their congregation to reflect a similar aesthetic approach to worship. For example, they wanted the rabbi to deliver a sermon in a language that they understood, just as the local minister did. Many also began to want an organ to be played to accompany the singing of prayers. Later, many congregations in both the North and the South moved away from ritual symbols such as the wearing of a head covering, and a prayer shawl. This was viewed as more in line with the prevailing model that they saw in the broader community. Many congregations introduced mixed choirs, which featured Christians as well as Jews in those choirs and mixed seating of women with men. There was an increased emphasis placed on decorum, which was particularly important in a southern society that measured social standing by one's attitude to civility.

Many Converts Were Not Fully Accepted

Conversion to Judaism was directly connected to intermarriage in most—but not all—cases. Intermarriage threatened the Jewish identity of the family because it meant by definition that one member of the couple was Jewish while the other was not. This would have a tremendous impact on how the couple placed themselves within the broader society, and how their children would identify themselves. While the dynamic could work in one of several ways, in an overwhelmingly Christian, or at least gentile environment, it was most likely that the children would move away from Judaism rather than towards it. For example, Benjamin Wolfe was a Jewish merchant in Richmond, Virginia, after the Revolutionary War. When he died in 1818, at the age of 50, he became the first person to be buried in the cemetery of Congregation Beth Shalom in that city. The Wolfes had seven sons and one daughter. Three and possibly four of the seven boys intermarried. It seems likely that all raised their children as non-Jews. The other sons do not appear to have married at all. The daughter apparently did marry a Jew, and some of her descendants are Jewish to this day.²² There were many cases where intermarriage led to the complete loss of Jewish identity.

There were other cases of intermarriages that led to the eventual conversion of the non-Jewish partner. Jonathan Sarna, of Brandeis University has

²² Myron Berman, *Richmond's Jewry, 1769–1976: Shabbat in Shockoe* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1979), pp. 44 and 139; and Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, *The History of the Jews of Richmond from 1769 to 1917* (Richmond, Virginia, 1917), pp. 122 and 258.

argued that there were others who 'passed into' the Jewish community without a formal conversion. But despite the obvious fact that as a small minority of the American southern population it would serve their communal interest to encourage non-Jews to convert, even full-fledged proselytes did not always receive a warm welcome. In spite of the fact that the Talmud states very clearly that once a person converts they should be treated like a Jew and not reminded constantly of their origins, this was frequently not the reality. Many American Jews in the North as well as in the South held primarily ethnic rather than religious concepts of identity.²³ Others viewed the religion in extremely legalistic terms. The combination of these two attitudes could produce a situation where a convert showed a consistent commitment to Judaic faith and practice, and yet was never fully accepted in a socio-religious sense. While a born Jew would retain his *halachic* identity as a Jew regardless of whom he married and what type of a life he lead, the convert to Judaism was constantly faced with the possibility of being rejected for either religious or ethnic reasons. For a male convert this could take the form of being denied an honour in the synagogue. A female convert might have her conversion certificate questioned which could result in the rejection of the Jewish authenticity of her children. The ultimate form of acceptance or rejection was burial in a Jewish cemetery. There were a number of cases in the South where serious converts who had lived as active Jews for years—even decades—were refused burial in the local Jewish cemetery.

Such was the case of Ann Sarah Irby of Charleston, South Carolina, who was of French Huguenot background. According to the family mythology, she fainted during the siege of Charleston when a British shell exploded near her. Upon awakening her eyes fell upon Abraham Alexander, Sr., the volunteer Hazan of Congregation Beth Elohim of Charleston. They fell in love and were married on December 26, 1784.²⁴ The family's oral traditions tell of Ann becoming strictly observant, following Jewish law in a rigorous manner. Despite his new wife's obvious commitment to Judaism, Abraham was forced to resign from his volunteer position at the Congregation. It was apparently felt that despite Ann's formal conversion she still was only partially acceptable as a marriage partner and this religious blemish disqualified Abraham from leading the congregation in prayer. The couple nevertheless remained married and spent their lives affiliated to the Jewish community.

When Ann passed away nineteen years after her husband's death, she requested in her Will that she be buried in the Beth Elohim Cemetery. The Will expressed her faith in 'The Almighty God of Israel my Creator' and records her desire to be buried 'with as little expense as decency will permit.' The Congregational board refused her request on the basis that there had been a

²³ On the definition of ethnicity and its connection to religious identity, see: Richard T. Schaefer, *Racial and Ethnic Groups*, sixth edition (New York, HarperCollins, 1996).

²⁴ 'The Ketubah of Abraham Alexander's Marriage to Ann Irby, A Convert to Judaism. Charleston, South Carolina', The Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Collection SC-169. Charles Resnikoff and Uriah Z. Engleman erroneously state that the couple was married in 1785. See *The Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publications Society of America), p. 52.

ceremonial omission in her conversion.²⁵ The ceremonial omission that was probably being referred to is the fact that Ann's conversion was not overseen by a *beit din* of three learned Talmudists. This would have been impossible since there was no *beit din* in or around Charleston—or anywhere else in America for that matter. Whether those opposed to her burial sincerely based their opposition on this *halachic* Catch 22, or whether they were just using this as an excuse to exclude someone they did not really accept for personal reasons, cannot be determined with any degree of certainty. Prejudice to outsiders undoubtedly played a role. A desire to remain loyal to the dictates of Jewish law may have also played a role. The subconscious conviction that a gentile could not be turned into a Jew by immersing them in a mikveh may have been the deciding factor. But the final decision was not to allow her to be buried in the Beth Elohim cemetery. There is no record of where Ann Sarah Irby Alexander was buried. The most likely site would have been a local Christian cemetery, perhaps that which her French Protestant family had used.

Another case of a convert to Judaism denied burial in a Jewish cemetery occurred in Richmond, Virginia. The convert involved was Elizabeth Whitlock. Elizabeth had been a teenager when she met Moses Mordecai in England in 1755.²⁶ Mordecai, forty-nine years of age, was obviously much older than she. They married in either 1760 or 1761, shortly after coming to the United States. First Elizabeth converted to Judaism, and then they were married in a Jewish ceremony. There is no record of the couple having previously been married in a civil ceremony, so this was probably their first marriage ceremony of any type. They settled in Philadelphia, and had at least three children. Elizabeth and Moses lived together happily for twenty years before he died, leaving very little money for his widow. She was so poor that she had to apply to the congregation in order to pay her rent. It was at this point that she met Jacob Cohen. Despite their attraction to one another, this relationship presented a serious problem. According to the *Halacha*, Cohen—a descendent of the ancient priestly class—was forbidden to marry either a proselyte or a divorcee. Elizabeth, who had taken the biblical name of Esther when she had converted many years earlier, was the former.²⁷ The board prohibited their religious functionary from performing the marriage.²⁸ Despite the fact that this occurred in Pennsylvania, it is relevant to this article because of the impact that it would have on her burial rites in Virginia.

²⁵ Arthur Hertzberg has argued that early American conversions were 'often defective in form'. See his *The Jews in America—Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1989), p. 53.

²⁶ On British Jews in the American Jewish Community, see Jacob Neusner, 'The Role of English Jews in the Development of American Jewish Life, 1775–1850', *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science* 12 (1958/59), pp. 131–156. I would like to thank Arthur Hertzberg for bringing this article to my attention.

²⁷ Minute Book of Mikveh Israel Congregation, Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, August 12, 1782.

²⁸ Minute Book of Mikveh Israel Congregation, Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, August 25, 1782.

After the marriage,²⁹ the adjuncta of the congregation did not issue a formal writ of excommunication against the couple, presumably because they viewed the marriage as a *fait accompli*. It may also have been common knowledge that the couple had plans to move to the South. The Cohens soon moved to Richmond, Virginia. According to Richmond Jewish historians Herbert Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, ‘Esther Cohen endeared herself to the entire Richmond community by numerous good deeds’.³⁰ But when Esther died on August 22, 1804 at the age of sixty, she was buried in the cemetery of St. John’s Church in Richmond. The only plausible explanation for this burial site was the fact that the local synagogue board refused permission for her to be buried in the local Jewish cemetery. Emily Bingham, who wrote her PhD dissertation on the Mordecai family agrees, ‘... it is very unlikely that Esther would have wanted burial at St. John’s Church. Jacob Cohen’s friends in Philadelphia had prevented his expulsion (including Haym Solomon) but no one seemed prepared to reverse the apparent rejection by Richmond’s adjuncta. And Cohen was a highly successful business man in Richmond, as well, who ... ended up making big contributions to Mikveh Israel after his return to Philadelphia.’³¹ Since Esther’s children were raised as Jews and remained in the faith, it was very doubtful that they would have requested a church burial. It is extremely probable that any other close relatives had been left behind in England decades earlier, and so it was unlikely that any of them requested such a burial. The only reason that Esther would not have been buried alongside her Jewish co-religionists was that permission for this was denied. The reasons for this denial were probably similar to the Alexander case—the legitimacy of her conversion was questioned. Unlike the Alexander case, Elizabeth’s influential husband was still alive. Apparently even Jacob did not have enough influence to get permission to have his wife buried in the Jewish cemetery.

*Informal Adoption of Judaism followed by Formal Conversion
Many Years Later*

One of the best-documented conversions to Judaism who lived in the antebellum South was that of Marie Berthelot. Marie married Jacob Lemann—originally Lehmann and pronounced lemon—in 1840 and converted in 1852. The Lemann family became one of the best-known clans in the region with a large and successful family and business interests that developed in a number of directions.³² Shortly after Jacob arrived in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, in

²⁹ ‘The Ketuvah of Esther Bat Abraham, the Wife of Yaakov Bar Yehoshua Hakohen, 1782 (1542)’, Ketuvot, Philadelphia. Haym Solomon Folder, Schwartron Collection, Hebrew University and National Library, Jerusalem, Israel.

³⁰ Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³¹ Emily Bingham, correspondence with author, May 1, 2000.

³² The Lemann family papers have been deposited at the Special Collections Division of the Tulane University Archives and number 15,666 pieces from 1801–1968. See Special Collection no. 168, Lemann Family Papers Special Collections (Tulane University Archives, New Orleans, LA).

1836 at the age of twenty-seven he began peddling to the local sugar planters. And, like many peddlers, he eventually earned enough cash to open a general store. In 1840 he married Marie, who was from a Catholic background.³³ After their marriage Marie integrated herself into the small but close-knit Jewish community in Donaldsonville.³⁴ Jacob developed a large network of business and social connections. He was very close personally as well as financially with many of the local planters and he used these contacts to expand not only his business but also those of other Jewish merchants in Donaldsonville. Profits from his store as well as other funding to make loans helped him to move into new economic arenas throughout the 1850s and 1860s. Jacob also cultivated extensive contacts with Jewish and non-Jewish businessmen in New Orleans, Newport, Rhode Island, and New York. According to economic historian Elliott Ashkenazi, 'his dealings with the many Jewish merchants in and around Donaldsonville demonstrate . . . clearly the affects of group cohesion shown in commerce among Jews.'³⁵ Jacob's business connections served to reinforce the couple's Jewish identity. Jacob was very interested in his Judaism and he was apparently able to get his wife to share this interest with him from early in their relationship. They visited Jewish businessmen throughout Louisiana and travelled repeatedly to Newport, Rhode Island and to New York City. As Jacob prospered, he bought homes in both of these places. Marie involved herself with the small Jewish community in Donaldsonville but was able to be exposed to a much more varied Jewish experience during the course of their stays in New Orleans and New York in particular. The family was very rooted in Donaldsonville but they spent several lengthy periods living elsewhere. In the 1850s they lived for a period in New York, where they owned a townhouse on West 23rd Street. It was during this time that Marie formally converted. The family spent the early years of the Civil War in Europe where they were part of a large contingent from Louisiana to reside in Paris. The Lemanns returned in 1863, going first to Newport and then to New York. As soon as they could, they returned to Louisiana. Jacob and Marie resettled in Donaldsonville and branches of the family established themselves in New Orleans.

Marie was an orphan, which may have been one of the reasons that she seemed to have integrated so well into the Jewish community. She apparently developed a deep devotion to Judaism and she lacked Catholic parental links that could have held her back from full embracing her husband's religious traditions. Even early in their marriage, Marie did not like to accept dining invitations to households that did not follow *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary reg-

³³ Stanley Clisby Arthur, 'Report on Genealogical Research for Jean Pierre Berthelot who married Marie Aspasia Lagrange', 1932, from The Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Lazard and Kahn Papers, 1821–1961, Collection 174.

³⁴ In the antebellum period there was a small Jewish congregation in Donaldsonville. It was part of a commercial building and was destroyed during the Civil War. Interview with Thomas Orum, New Orleans, April 2000. In the 1860s a new congregation, Bikur Cholim, was founded in Donaldsonville. See *The Jewish Messenger*, August 4, 1871, June 9, 1872 and December 13, 1872.

³⁵ Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana 1840–1875* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), p. 33.

ulations. According to the family history book:

It has been said that Miriam [Marie's Hebrew name, given to her at her conversion ceremony] Berthelot Lemann followed the strict practices of the Jewish religion with all the faithfulness that had evidently been developed in her by rigorous Catholic upbringing. An anecdote that seems to bear out this tale is recalled by Mrs. I. I. Lemann from the family of her maternal grandfather, Leopold Levi of Cincinnati, who had a whisky trade [through], which he had become a business acquaintance and friend of Jacob Lemann. When, early in their marriage, Miriam accompanied her husband to Cincinnati, she did not like to accept dining invitations from the Levis because that household did not observe the orthodox dietary laws. Whenever Jacob showed signs of forgetting or relaxing the rules, she was quick to remind him of his religious duties.³⁶

Although this is not specified, it appears that Marie's commitment to Jewish observance was manifested even before her formal conversion to Judaism, which took place in 1852.³⁷ The Lemanns were living in New York at this time and had integrated themselves well into the New York Jewish community. Jacob had shown an ability to fit into both North and South and was able to establish his personal as well as financial connections in both regions before, during and after the Civil War. They became aware that Rabbi Max Lilienthal, the chief rabbi of three Orthodox synagogues in New York City, had organized a *beit din* to perform various *halachic* procedures including conversion. Lilienthal had already established a significant if somewhat controversial reputation in Germany and Russia and was one of the most prominent rabbis in the United States at this time. He worked closely with Isaac Mayer Wise from the time that Wise arrived in America. It was Lilienthal who helped launch Wise's career as a successful pulpit rabbi. Later, Wise helped to bring Lilienthal to Cincinnati and Lilienthal supported Wise's efforts to build a national institutional structure for American Judaism.

Marie and Jacob evidently approached Lilienthal and he readily agreed to perform a conversion ceremony. This was one of several conversions that Lilienthal supervised during this time period. It seems likely that most of the conversion candidates had been in long-term relationships prior to being interviewed by Rabbi Lilienthal. In any case, a date for a conversion ceremony was set and the ceremony was performed as required by the *halacha*. The conversion certificate was written entirely in Hebrew and was signed by Lilienthal and two additional witnesses. It has the traditional opening at the top of the page 'Blessed by the Name', and the text reads:

On the fourth day of the week, the 13th day of Tamuz, in the year 5612 A.M. in the presence of a Jewish religious court (of three), came before us the woman Marie Ester Ber de Lot and said that this is her desire and request from us that

³⁶ Bernard Lemann, *The Lemann Family of Louisiana*, Family History Book, provided by Thomas B. Lemann. Thomas, an attorney in New Orleans is a direct descendant of Jacob and Marie, as is Bernard.

³⁷ Marie Berthelot Conversion Certificate, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1852, The Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, File SC-993. The American Jewish Archives lists this item as being from New Orleans, Louisiana. The actual conversion took place in New York City where the Lemanns lived for a period.

we enter her under the wings of Judaism (Schinah); for a number of years she is married to a Jew civilly according to the law of this land, and that her son was circumcised and became a Jew according to Jewish law, therefore she too says that their people is my people, their God is my God, where they go I shall go, and where they die shall I die—; and we would not withhold benefits from one seeking them, and we immersed her in a pool [*Mikveh*] of cleansing water, and we named her Miriam, daughter of Abraham our Father, and now she is as any daughter of Israel, and may the Lord recompense her work; and all our brethren, the house of Israel, are obligated to fulfill the commandment of our holy Torah, ‘And ye shall love the stranger’.³⁸

This was a traditional *teudat giur*, conversion certificate, and appears to have been executed in accordance with *halachic* requirements.³⁹ Marie took it upon herself to observe Jewish law as strictly as possible. Certainly her conversion was not for the sake of marriage, since it occurred about 12 years after their original civil marriage. The fact that Marie appears to have become committed to Judaism at an early stage of her relationship with a Jewish man, and to have converted much later was not unusual during this time period. It does raise the question of how many couples there were where the non-Jewish partner adopted Judaism as her religion and the Jewish community as her social structure, but never formally converted. Since there is insufficient data on the religious orientations of intermarried couples in the antebellum South, the historian must rely on impressions made from anecdotal evidence. It does seem logical that from the pattern that we see in the Lemann household there must have been other couples that proceeded in much the same manner but never underwent a formal conversion. Indeed, it is possible that if the family had not lived in New York for a substantial amount of time Marie herself might never have formally converted.

On the same day, the couple was re-married in a Jewish ceremony. The marriage document is likewise extant and is a traditional *Ketuvah*, which identifies Jacob as Jehudah, the son of Peretz, and his wife as Miriam, a convert, the daughter of Abraham. While Rabbi Max Lilienthal signed both certificates, the witnesses are different.⁴⁰ The couple probably wanted to give honours to as many people as possible. Jacob and Marie had three children, Bernard, Myer, and Coralie Alice. Nicholas Lemann, a well known journalist who is a direct descendent, relates ‘the children of Jacob and Marie all married Jews. In the next generation, the one child who married a Catholic agreed to his children being raised as Catholics (though he did not convert himself); as a result of this, one substantial branch of the Lemann family is Catholic today.’⁴¹ Most of the other many living descendants are Jewish to this day. The family dynamic here indicates the importance of the religious orientation that

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ The certificate was signed: ‘Here in New York, Wednesday 13 days in Tamuz 5612 [1852]. Menahem Jeudah Lilienthal, who resides in New York; Jacob, son of Joseph Abraham; Jehuda, son of Napthali Levenberg of Congregation Anshe Chesed.’

⁴⁰ The two witnesses for the marriage certificate were Jehudah Strasser and David Dressfield.

⁴¹ Nicholas Lemann, correspondence with the author, November 25, 1996. Nicholas is the son of Thomas and is the great-great grandson of Jacob and Marie.

the couple developed—regardless of whether it was formalized by an official ceremony or not.

*Halachic Problems in the Crucible of the Nineteenth-Century
Southern Social Reality*

The Lemann family presented us with an example of a stable family that prospered and were able to rear children in a warm and happy home. But many couples in the nineteenth century South—and elsewhere in the United States as well—were involved in much less stable unions. One factor which is never explicitly mentioned in a single source but which may nevertheless be of the utmost importance is the likelihood that many of the women who married Jewish men were pregnant at the time of marriage. Premarital sex was far more relevant than might be thought considering the very harsh laws on the books against ‘fornication’ as well as premarital pregnancy. According to one estimate 33.7% of all first births in New England from 1761 through 1800 occurred after less than nine months of marriage.⁴² This could explain the instability present in some of the unions. The scenario would have involved a brief courtship leading to sexual relations, despite the couple’s awareness that religious and family differences would have made marriage unthinkable. But when the consequence of sexual activity was an unexpected pregnancy, it resulted in the couple reconsidering marriage. This would provide motivation for considering conversion to Judaism in cases where the young man was firmly rooted in the Jewish community. It could also explain the synagogue elders’ reluctance to go along with the religious conversion, which would have to occur under conditions of extreme urgency and duress.

How they chose to conduct their religious life—as today—varied enormously from couple to couple and family to family. Some came to the Jewish community with a request for conversion, while others may have moved closer to the non-Jewish partner’s Christian community. There was a substantial middle group who were neither determined to practice an intense form of Judaism but were also not interested in severing all ties. The situation where the husband was Jewish and the wife was not was certainly a difficult one because it involved a *halachic* problem, namely that the children of such a union would not be regarded as Jews because the mother was not Jewish.

There were other cases that raised questions and created problems. For example, at the end of 1872, the Jewish community of Jefferson, Texas⁴³ was faced with a dilemma. Apparently a Jewish woman had married a non-Jewish

⁴² Finke and Stark, *The Churking of America, 1776–1990*, op. cit., p. 22. See also Daniel Scott Smith, ‘The Dating of the American Sexual Revolution: Evidence and Interpretation’ in John F. Crosby (ed.) *Reply to Myth: Perspectives on Intimacy* (New York: John Wiley, 1985). Steven Mintz writes that ‘as many as forty percent of New England women were already pregnant at the time of marriage.’ Steven Mintz, *Moralizers and Modernizers—America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 8.

⁴³ For a series of eleven biographical sketches of nineteenth and twentieth century Texan rabbis, see Hollace Eva Weiner, *Jewish Stars in Texas: Rabbis and Their Work* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).

man and they had a son. Although the son was Jewish according to *halachic* criteria, the parents did not have him circumcised. While still a child, the boy passed away and the family approached the Hebrew Benevolent Association to request that he be buried in the local Jewish cemetery. The Hebrew Benevolent Association held a meeting to discuss how they should respond and they decided to send queries to two nationally respected rabbis, Rabbi James Gutheim of New Orleans, and Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati. It was no accident that these two rabbis were chosen because they lived in or near the South and both were sensitive to southern perspectives on religious issues. However, it would be impossible to wait for answers to be received because the child's body obviously had to be buried. According to traditional Judaism, the burial should take place within twenty-four hours. Even if the family was not insistent upon that point, the responses could take weeks to be received. So a decision was made to bury the child in the Jewish cemetery but only after a posthumous circumcision was performed. There is a precedent for this practice in *halachic* literature but it was a rather strict interpretation for a small Jewish community in nineteenth century Texas to have adopted. The letters informed the rabbis of what had been done and asked for their opinion concerning what should be done if such a case should arise in the future. On November 25, Rabbi Gutheim responded that:

I am please to inform you that your action in ordering the body of the child in question [to be buried] in the Jewish Cemetery was in full accord with the Jewish custom and law. It is a well-established rule of the rabbinical law that 'The offspring is counted after the mother', hence, the children of every Jewish woman must be regarded as belonging to the Jewish Communion, simply by virtue of their birth.⁴⁴

Gutheim was, however, horrified that a post-mortem *brit milah* had been performed. Nevertheless, he felt it wise to first praise them, and only then to point out his objection.

Whilst your course is fully justified by Jewish Law, it also evinces a highly commendable liberal spirit. There is, however, one point incident to this matter, which ought to have been omitted, I mean the circumcision of the body prior to burial. This revolting custom is founded on superstition and is better honoured in its breach than its observance. Circumcision applies to the living and not to the dead and hence should never be performed on a corpse. You will pardon me for gratuitously adding my opinion on this point. It is not done for the purpose of finding fault but springs from the sincere motive of disseminating correct notions and enlightened views concerning our religious views and practices.⁴⁵

A response was also received from Isaac Mayer Wise, written on November 26th, in which he states that:

According to the Talmud and the Orthodox rule, the child of a Jewish mother is a Jew to all intents and purposes, hence may be buried, or rather ought to be buried according to Jewish rites and on Jewish burial ground. I must tell you

⁴⁴ Hebrew Benevolent Association Minutes, Jefferson, Texas, 1873, The Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Folder SC-1726.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

that the above rule is not mine; but in regard to burial the Talmud says, 'Also the dead of heathens may be buried with the dead of Israel, to serve the cause of peace', hence in this case there can certainly be no objection.⁴⁶

Wise suggests that even if the child was not actually Jewish, the burial could be conducted anyway in order to avoid further devastating the bereaved parents.

But the case of a deceased child was extreme. In general, rabbis as well as parents would pressure inter-dating couples to have the non-Jewish partner convert to Judaism before marriage. This was the policy of Rabbi Abraham Blum.⁴⁷ Typically the conversion ceremony and wedding would occur on the same day and frequently in close succession. This was true when Theodosia Rushing converted in Galveston in 1874. Her father was a prominent local journalist and the editor of the *Ennis Argus*. A report from the synagogue stated that:

On Sunday the synagogue was crowded to its utmost capacity by an audience eager to witness the dual ceremonies of the reception of a convert to Judaism, and her subsequent marriage to a gentleman of the religion. The Holy Arc [*sic*]—the readers [*sic*] desk, and the small stand in front of the Arc were covered with white drapery embroidered in silver.⁴⁸

Theodosia, her intended groom Philip Freeman, her father, Colonel Rushing, and Rebbetzin Hannah Blum all walked down the broad aisle of the synagogue. As they walked toward the sanctuary the choir sang a selection of Hebrew songs. Before conducting the actual conversion ceremony, Rabbi Blum gave a sermon stressing the solemnity and *rarity* of the ceremony that he was about to perform. After the conversion took place, the marriage ceremony commenced. There were many reports of this type, which could be found in Jewish and general newspapers that appeared throughout the middle and late nineteenth century. Although it is never stated, one can easily sense the family dynamics and politics, which must have preceded the conversion and marriage. Despite the fact the *halacha* would discourage conversions performed for the sake of marriage, the Jewish families involved were less concerned with the minutia of Jewish legal restrictions than they were in ensuring that their family's religious identity would be maintained. It is extremely difficult to evaluate how active many of these converts became in their local Jewish communities or how devoted they were to their new religion. There are anecdotes told about certain converts who seem to have played very active and even central roles in sisterhoods and similar Jewish organizations, but there are many whose names do not reappear in any of the documents from the period.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ On Blum, see William M. Kramer and Reva Clar, 'Rabbi Abraham Blum: From Alsace to New York By Way of Texas and California—Part I', *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly*, vol. XII, No. 1, October 1979, pp. 73–88. 'Part II', vol. XII, No. 2, January 1980, pp. 170–184. 'Part III', vol. XII, No. 3, April 1980, pp. 266–281.

⁴⁸ *The American Israelite*, October 2, 1874, p. 2.

Reports from Isaac Mayer Wise on his Conversionary Activities

Isaac Mayer Wise was the founder and builder of the Reform Movement in America. After several years in Albany, New York he moved to Cincinnati, Ohio where he spent the rest of his long and extremely productive career. He founded or was the leading force behind the founding of all three of the major institutions of the American Reform movement. Wise had helped to build a unified American Judaism but eventually reconciled himself to the reality that American Jews were too divided by denominational differences to work together within a single organizational framework. Cincinnati was on the border with Kentucky and hence Wise was very close to and stayed in close contact with congregations throughout the South. He travelled as much as he could throughout the United States to dedicate synagogues, induct new rabbis and lead services. On occasion he also officiated at conversions. In most cases this occurred where the local community did not have a resident rabbi, but they had one or more people who could provide basic instruction in the beliefs and practices of Judaism, and the congregation as a whole had accepted and integrated a prospective proselyte.

Spread out in hundreds of towns throughout the region, southern Jews lived in close economic as well as social proximity to their non-Jewish neighbours. They were very much a part of southern society and felt the need to conform as much as possible to southern social patterns. This motivated many groups of southern Jews in the later part of the nineteenth century to gravitate towards a Classical Reform model of Judaism. This was on one hand a dramatic departure from traditional Jewish beliefs and practices, and yet was in many ways socially conservative and hence fit in well with southern town life.

Wise recorded the major events of his trips in his newspaper, *The American Israelite*, which enables us to learn the details of some of the conversions that he performed. In 1875 Wise travelled to Parkersburg, West Virginia. At that time Parkersburg had a very small Jewish community of about fifteen families. Wise describes the town as ‘... a nice, clean, busy little city, with two daily papers, an old and grave court-house, quite a number of handsome stores and neat private dwellings.’⁴⁹ Wise described a conversion and subsequent double wedding in his newspaper:

In Parkersburg, April 14th, Miss Raunch was married to Mr. Cohen. On this occasion the bride’s mother, a born Christian, was received into the covenant of Judaism by Dr. Wise, and remarried her husband. So it happened that mother and daughter were married on the same day. All Parkersburg was at the double wedding, gazed, ate, drank, danced, was happy; and next morning the two newspapers had a spicy item of news to report, which was done admirably well. There was peace and concord, friendship and fraternal feelings.⁵⁰

What apparently had occurred was that a Jewish man named Raunch had married a non-Jewish woman and they had a daughter and probably other

⁴⁹ *The American Israelite*, April 23, 1875, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

children as well who were raised as Jews. With only about fifteen Jewish families in the city there was certainly no permanent rabbi. Nevertheless, the Jewish families did interact with each other and the daughter of the Raunchs met a young man named Cohen. The parents took the opportunity of their daughter's wedding to have the mother formally convert and the parents were able to re-marry in a Jewish ceremony. Whether Wise required the daughter to convert is not specified. There was no official policy of patrilineal descent in nineteenth century American Reform Judaism, but it is possible that Wise accepted the fact that the young woman had been raised as a Jew as sufficient. It is also possible that the daughter had already been formally converted. If that were so, Wise would have been following the Talmudic principle of not reminding a convert of their past.

Wise also took the opportunity to criticize the Jewish men of the town for not establishing a formal congregation. He wrote:

Our co-religionists in Baltimore [*sic*] have no organization, but their good ladies are banded together to a benevolent society. Mine [*sic*] host, this time, was a hostess, Mrs. Lena Prager, who is preferable to any host on account of her courtesy, hospitality, and kindness. The ladies of Parkersburg are all very affable and kind. The gentlemen are sinners and publicans, for they can not afford to support a Hebrew congregation.⁵¹

Wise also reported on conversions done by other rabbis in the South. When Rabbi Max Samfield of Memphis, Tennessee performed two conversions on consecutive Saturday mornings, *The American Israelite* reported:

On the 18th of September, Mrs. A. Paterson, and on the 25th, Miss Lucy Franklin, publicly renounced Christianity and embraced Judaism, the first mentioned lady was raised in the Catholic faith, the latter was an Episcopalian. The ceremony in both instances was conducted by Rev. Dr. Samfield in an appropriate and solemn manner, before large congregations.⁵²

The conversions were done in public at a regular Sabbath morning service. Since the conversions were done on consecutive Sabbaths, it is clear that the two women prepared for their conversions during the same time period. Nevertheless, Rabbi Samfield preferred to perform each conversion at a separate service. In both cases, marriage was the motive for conversion. *The American Israelite* did not attempt to hide this fact and in the same article reports both the conversions and the subsequent marriages.

Mrs. Paterson, upon whom was conferred the name Leah, was married last Sunday evening to Mr. David Lowenstein, a prominent and highly esteemed merchant of Memphis. To Miss Franklin the name of Rachel was given and she was also married to an Israelite, Mr. J. Danheiser. We express the sincere hope that neither of the ladies may have cause to regret the important step they have taken, but, that as they advance in years they may also advance in knowledge and love of their new faith.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *The American Israelite*, October 1, 1875, p. 7.

⁵³ Ibid.

And yet in another conversion case from 1880, Wise specifically pointed out that the particular conversion being reported was done for ideological reasons and not solely practical ones.

On December 30th, Mrs. A. Maxwell, of Nashville, Tenn., embraced the Jewish faith, having been previously instructed by Dr. Goldammer. Her union with her husband was subsequently sanctified according to the Jewish rite. Her conversion was the result of a solemn conviction, not of mere expediency.⁵⁴

It is difficult to ascertain whether it was originally Goldammer or Wise who had stressed the fact that the conversion was done for idealistic reasons in addition to the marriage motive. Either way, it does show that there was sensitivity to the possibility that some people might question the sincerity of the convert and/or the legitimacy of the conversion. There was also the desire to stress the attractiveness of Judaism as a religion for the converts.

*Universalism and Particularism as Conflicting Sources
of Ideological Motivation*

Late nineteenth-century Classical Reform Judaism advocated a universalistic conception of the Jewish religion that held that non-Jews could and should embrace ethical monotheism. This would mean the acceptance of the religious concepts and perhaps even the form of American Reform Judaism. Attempts were made at the Philadelphia Conference of 1869, and later at the Pittsburgh Conference of 1885, to present Judaism as a universalistic religion consistent with contemporary theories on evolution, biblical scholarship, and the concept of progress. Many reformers argued that Judaism could fulfill the religious needs of all people, not just those who were born Jewish. Yet most Classical Reform rabbis—including those in the South—struggled to reconcile this universalistic rhetoric with their particularistic focus. There were a few Reform intellectuals such as Solomon Schindler, Charles Fleischer, and most significantly, Felix Adler,⁵⁵ the founder of the Ethical Culture Movement, who moved away from a particularistic Jewish identity entirely.

There were no such high-profile cases in the South. The closest that the South came to a high-profile rabbinic defection came when Rabbi Solomon Sonnenschein of St. Louis, Missouri—which was a border state—travelled to Boston to allegedly interview for the pulpit of a Unitarian church.⁵⁶ But most Reform leaders, like most Reform congregants, wanted to remain identified with Judaism as a religion and the synagogue as a community. Rabbis justified the continued existence of the Jewish people by arguing that the Jews

⁵⁴ *The American Israelite*, January 16, 1880, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979).

⁵⁶ Benny Kraut, 'A Unitarian Rabbi? The Case of Solomon H. Sonnenschein', Todd M. Endelman (ed.), *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1987), pp. 272–309. Also see the more recent account by Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis*, vol. I (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 280–302.

had a religious mission that had been given to Israel by God. They stated that not only would Judaism survive, but that it would become the one truly universalistic religion of humanity, at least in America.

Judaism was the truest form of ethical monotheism toward which all of humanity should be striving, and therefore Jews must try to spread the universal religious message it contained to all those they could reach. That was the theory. In practice most Reform rabbis did not put great energies into proselytizing among America's non-Jews. Many accepted the desirability of receiving converts and rejected the traditional view that proselytes should be discouraged. But they understood that their congregations were not, by any stretch of the imagination, universalistic centres of ethical monotheism but rather somewhat cliquish groups of 'German' Jews⁵⁷ who isolated themselves socially not only from most non-Jews but even from their eastern European co-religionists. This was a generality but it had a great deal of truth, in the South as well as the North.

While on paper Reform rabbis preached universalism, in their rabbinates they catered to the specific needs of a clearly defined socio-economic ethnic subgroup. Even though many preached against an ethnic concept of Jewishness, they could do little to change the social reality. Samuel Sale of St. Louis wrote in Emil Hirsch's *The Reform Advocate*:

We must stop prating about our race, else the glory of our fathers will be put to shame The race—Jew is a fiction in the light of facts, an excrescence, a vampire on the life of Israel, he is a Jew, who is my brother by moral kinship, and not by blood; it is a religion and not the race.⁵⁸

Adolph Moses of Louisville, Kentucky even advocated that the term 'Judaism' should be changed to 'Yahvism' in order to make it completely clear to prospective co-religionists not born as Jews that Judaism is a faith for all those interested and not a religion exclusively or even primarily for those born as Jews.⁵⁹ While Adolph Moses was exceptional in his creativity, his basic premise was accepted by the overwhelming majority of late nineteenth century Reform rabbis. Thus, it is surprising that on the occasions when potential proselytes approached Reform rabbis for conversion without a Jewish partner the response was usually far from enthusiastic. When W. E. Todd, of Tappahannock, Virginia made a serious appeal to Rabbi Edward Calisch to help him convert to Judaism and study for the Reform rabbinat, the national leaders that Calisch consulted urged him to dissuade Todd.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Hasia R. Diner has explained that many of these 'German' Jews were from a much broader geographical region than that name might suggest. See *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration 1820–1880* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

⁵⁸ *The Reform Advocate*, vol. I, March 13, 1891, p. 64.

⁵⁹ Adolph Moses, *Yahvism and Other Discourses*, Louisville (The Louisville Section of the Council of Jewish Women, 1903).

⁶⁰ Dana Evan Kaplan, 'W. E. Todd's Attempt to Convert to Judaism and Study for the Reform Rabbinat in 1896', *American Jewish History*, vol. 83, No. 4, December 1995, pp. 429–444.

Traditional Rabbis under Pressure to Facilitate Conversions

Not all conversions done in the South in the nineteenth century were done under Reform auspices. Early in the century, congregations throughout the country were still traditional in practice. It was during the 1840s that the first signs of change began to emerge.⁶¹ But a number of synagogues remained traditional to greater or lesser degrees, including some southern congregations. Other synagogues that did make certain reforms did not necessarily regard themselves as 'Reform'. One congregation that initiated certain changes, but was nevertheless still traditional in its focus was Mikveh Israel in Savannah, Georgia.⁶²

In general, the more traditional rabbis were much more hesitant to perform conversions. They very likely were skeptical about the convert's motives, and judged the success or failure of the conversion in more narrowly defined terms. Nevertheless, many such rabbis did officiate at conversions, frequently because there could be considerable community pressure on them to do so. For example, in 1892 Rabbi Isaac Pereira Mendes⁶³ of Congregation Mikveh Israel of Savannah officiated at the conversion of Mrs. F. A. Ehrlich. It is noteworthy that Rabbi Mendes did not convert her on his own authority. Rather, he brought the case to the adjunta, the synagogue board, with the statement that he had 'no faith in conversion.' Nevertheless he spoke very highly of the potential proselyte stating that her declaration of interest in converting to Judaism '... was an act of her own free will and accord, no mercenary motives, but simply a pure desire and love for our holy religion.'⁶⁴ Mendes told the Board that because of Mrs. Ehrlich's exceptional character, he was willing to convert her. One can see very clearly in Mendes's words his desire to separate this particular case, where he viewed the applicant's motives as being beyond reproach, from the 'run of the mill conversion for the purpose of marriage cases,' which were far more common. The Board granted Mendes permission to convert the woman.

It is very probable that Mendes deliberately sought Board permission to sanction a conversion as a device to reduce the pressure on the Rabbi to perform conversions with which he felt uncomfortable. Should such a case come before him, he could turn it over to the synagogue Board with a confidential recommendation that the Board reject the request. Assuming that the Board supported the Rabbi's decision, the Rabbi could explain his refusal to officiate as simply obeying the will of the Board. If the Board decided to over-rule the Rabbi and to allow the conversion, the Rabbi could justifiably assuage his

⁶¹ One exception was Charleston, South Carolina.

⁶² For an account of the Jews in Savannah up until 1880, see Mark I. Greenberg, *Creating Ethnic, Class, and Southern Identity in Nineteenth-Century America: The Jews of Savannah, Georgia, 1830–1880* (PhD Dissertation, University of Florida, 1997).

⁶³ For an analysis of Mendes' Rabbinic Leadership, see Mark I. Greenberg, *Creating Ethnic, Class, and Southern Identity in Nineteenth-Century America: The Jews of Savannah, Georgia 1830–1880*, op. cit., pp. 213–218.

⁶⁴ *Savannah Congregational Minutes*, Volume 3, November 17, 1892, pp. 27–28. These minutes are cited from Saul Jacob Rubin, *Third to None—The Saga of Savannah Jewry* (Savannah Georgia, privately printed, 1983), p. 203 and 376 note 105.

conscience with the knowledge that he had done everything in his power, short of resigning his position, to prevent an insincere conversion. The referral of conversion requests to the Board was apparently standard policy during that period in the Savannah congregation. When a Miss Heyman wrote to Rabbi Mendes requesting conversion in 1898, the synagogue minutes record that the Rabbi again brought the case to the Board '... not wishing to perform this act of conversion without the consent of the Board'. The President and Vice-President met with Miss Heyman and then approved her request.⁶⁵

Even within a traditional context, one can see that the conversion process was influenced by a number of extra-religious factors. This would include the nature of the relationship between the rabbi and the board as well as the impression that the prospective proselyte made on the congregation. A sincere and dedicated individual who seemed to be psychologically stable and socially engaging might have a much easier time than someone who lacked these attributes.

Rabbinical Families Not Immune to Assimilatory Pressures

Throughout the later part of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century issues of Jewish identity were repeatedly brought forth. As a minority ethnic and religious group within a predominantly non-Jewish society, American Jews were constantly attempting to re-define their identities in terms of their social surrounding. Jews in the South developed a dual identity as Jews in a predominantly Christian country and as southern Jews in a predominantly non-southern American Jewish community. Southern Jews wanted to be accepted as southerners, but most of them also wanted to preserve their distinct identity as Jews. They were attempting to perpetuate these identities in a South that was undergoing a great deal of economic and social change.

Most southern rabbis attempted to discourage intermarriage, certainly in those cases where a conversion did not take place. Rabbi Max Heller of New Orleans argued that he was opposed to intermarriage 'In the interest of the preservation of ... [Jewish] religion and ... race, using the latter term untechnically'.⁶⁶ Heller pointed out that his opposition to intermarriage did not come from an 'arrogant' belief that Jews were in any way superior but rather from a desire to work for 'the solidarity of Judaism and ... the Jewish individuality' which was threatened by the 'surrounding Christian atmosphere'. But Heller was aware that there were a large number of liberally oriented people who were quite willing to tolerate intermarriage without conversion. Heller believed that these people 'undervalue[d] the importance of religious conviction in shaping character'.

At the end of World War I, Heller's oldest daughter, Cecile became very serious with a young Catholic man. Rabbi Heller threatened to disown her

⁶⁵ *Savannah Congregational Minutes*, February 13, 1898, Rubin, op. cit. p. 203 and 376, note 106.

⁶⁶ Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929* (Tuscaloosa and London, The University of Alabama Press, 1997), p. 153.

completely if she married a non-Jew. Cecile wrote to her father that she had suggested that he convert, but her boyfriend felt that this would be hypocritical since he was agnostic in terms of faith and Catholic in terms of culture. Interestingly enough, Cecile's brother James, who had recently been ordained as a Reform rabbi like his father, attempted to pressure Max into giving Cecile his support for the marriage even if he did not want to attend the wedding ceremony. Max persevered and Cecile eventually agreed to postpone the marriage until the end of World War I.⁶⁷ This effectively meant an end to the relationship, and at the beginning of 1920 she married Edward Lasker, a Jewish chess champion from Chicago. Cecile died tragically less than a year later from diabetic complications following surgery.⁶⁸

Max Heller was very concerned that 'racial suicide' could destroy the Jews in America and he argued that intermarriage would ultimately result in an undesirable homogenization of the American population that would destroy the different 'racial types' that had strengthened rather than weakened American society. From his perspective in New Orleans, Heller observed that it was the wealthier Jews who were most likely to either intermarry or convert to Christianity. He compared this process to a pyramid where the 'diminishing top . . . [was] continually breaking off through baptism and intermarriage'.⁶⁹ And yet not all intermarried couples disappeared into the American melting pot. Substantial numbers of intermarried couples joined his congregation as well as a number of other more liberally oriented synagogues in Louisiana.

This again created a burial issue. In 1914 Heller requested that the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) issue a statement that would support the burial of non-Jewish spouses in Jewish cemeteries provided that no non-Jewish ceremonies were performed, no non-Jewish symbols were displayed and that there was no violation of any Judaic principle. In 1915 the rabbis of the three Reform congregations in New Orleans asked the board of directors of the cemeteries that were run under Reform auspices to adopt a rule that would permit non-Jewish spouses to be buried alongside their wives or husbands.

While Heller did not actually officiate at any intermarriage ceremonies, Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston, Texas⁷⁰ performed approximately twenty intermarriage ceremonies during a sixty year career in the Lone Star State. He claimed that nearly all of these couples joined his synagogue and enrolled their children in the synagogue's religious school.⁷¹ His claim was probably accurate.

⁶⁷ A letter from James Heller to Max Heller April 8, 1918, James Heller Papers, Box 7, Folder 5, The Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.

⁶⁸ Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller*, op. cit. pp. 153 and 241, footnote 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 154.

⁷⁰ On Cohen, see Hollace Ava Weiner, *Jewish Stars in Texas*, op. cit., pp. 58–79. Weiner entitles the chapter on Cohen 'The Quintessential Texas Rabbi.' She makes no mention of his intermarriage policy.

⁷¹ Hollace Ava Weiner, 'The Mixers: The Role of Rabbis Deep in the Heart of Texas', *American Jewish History*, vol. 85, Number 3, September 1997, p. 311.

Conclusion

It would be wonderful to be able to conclude by showing the uniqueness of the conversion to Judaism phenomena in the context of nineteenth century southern society. It is certainly true that the South is not just a geographical region, but that it had a distinctive culture in the nineteenth century that had a strong impact on the development of Judaism. But there were a series of overlapping and extremely complex forces shaping the influences on religion. Exactly as Lewis Rambo has suggested, conversion takes place in the context of a dynamic interaction between people and institutions, and expectations and orientations.⁷² Because it is contextual, it influences and perhaps more significantly is influenced by a confluence of factors. For many of the individuals who converted to Judaism in the nineteenth century South, we will never know all of the considerations and motivations that played roles in their decision-making process.

What seems clear is, like so much of nineteenth century southern Judaism, the conversion process was initiated and supported by lay-people. In a warm and accepting congregation, a woman such as Esther Mordecai Cohen could integrate and become a force for good in the Richmond, Virginia Jewish and general community. On the other hand, as we have seen, the exclusionary impact of Jewish ethnic identity could interact with a sincere or less than sincere commitment to detailed *halachic* observance to put converts and their families in an awkward and unpleasant situation. Such individuals could find their children rejected as lacking a legitimate Jewish pedigree and they themselves could be denied burial in a Jewish cemetery. Much depended on the local political and religious environment, as well as the nature of the personalities involved. Southern Jews were charting new terrain in their relationship with the society around them and they were likewise responding on an ad hoc basis to the identity issues that their pioneering endeavours had generated.

⁷² Rambo, op. cit.