

ARTICLES

Rabbi Samuel Freuder as a Christian Missionary: American Protestant Premillennialism and an Apostate Returner, 1891–1924

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Is it mere vanity on my part to think that the future historian will take notice of me? Not at all. My own personality, I am fully aware, is of little consequence. But my case being so strange in the annals of Judaism, it cannot but attract the attention of the historian who aims to give a full and true picture of the present period of Jewish life in America.¹

These intriguing words come from *My Return to Judaism*, the autobiography of Samuel Freuder. Never had their author spoken or written so prophetically, for Freuder's career was indeed extraordinary, and he captures here with precision the paradox that he had, on the one hand, a career like almost no other Jew before or since, and at the same time a career deeply indicative of the emerging nature of American Jewish identity. For Freuder was not merely that rare thing, a convert to Christianity; he was a *rabbi* who converted to Christianity, who then had a sporadic career as a missionary, and who then returned to Judaism two decades later. Best of all, for the historian: he wrote and argued copiously both about his own motives (religious, social, and political) and about the motives of the Jews and Christians with whom he came into contact.

Freuder was born in Nemet Keresztur, a small town in Hungary. Both his father and his grandfather had served as hazanim, and Freuder was raised in an intensely Jewish environment. He studied at the Pressburg Yeshiva, and then at the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin, but he states that he was not intellectually convinced by Hildesheimer's neo-Orthodoxy, and he decided to emigrate. In his autobiography he speaks of his July 1883 arrival in the United States:

my hope was to become a prosperous merchant, and I made a start for that final goal by peddling with suspenders. Who knows but that I might have succeeded in the end, had not my peddling career been cut short by a letter of recommendation, which I should have thrown away, too. This letter to a prominent businessman of Cincinnati, Ohio, drew me to that city. The gentleman to whom the letter was addressed—either because he failed to see in me a mercantile genius, or because it was the easiest way of getting rid of me—turned me over to the Rev. Dr. Isaac M. Wise.²

Isaac Mayer Wise accepted Freuder to the Hebrew Union College and even helped him to learn English by taking him out to what Freuder called Wise's "country home," where, Wise joked, even the hens cackled in English.³

Freuder claimed later that from 1883 to 1886 he had studied at Hebrew Union College and at the University of Cincinnati. In fact, he was probably a student at the Hebrew Union College only during the year 1883–84, and it is unclear whether he actually graduated. He claimed that he was ordained as a rabbi from the college in 1886;⁴ while a Jewish newspaper from the following year affirmed this account,⁵ it remains unclear whether it is correct. According to Rosalind Chaiken, registrar of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, "Rabbi Freuder is not listed on the 'Alumni of the College' page in the catalogue of the college for the year 1896–97. Nor is he listed in subsequent catalogues."⁶ This absence provides a further indication that Isaac Mayer Wise—who was still very much the leader of the college in 1896—did not regard Freuder as an official graduate. However, Freuder's rabbinical thesis on medieval Jewish philosophy, "Jewish philosophers on the freedom of the will," is present in the HUC's collection of rabbinical theses.⁷

One Radical Reform-oriented newspaper wrote an article in 1887 listing Freuder among the graduates of Hebrew Union College, so there was a perception among many that he was an HUC graduate.⁸ But the *American Israelite* wrote that he had been a student at Hebrew



Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, founder and president of the Hebrew Union College (American Jewish Archives)

Union College for only one year.⁹ *Die Deborah*, a German-language newspaper published by Wise himself, stated that Freuder attended Hebrew Union College only for one year and was not ordained due to lack of classroom attendance. This statement does not necessarily mean that Freuder did not attend classes regularly but only that there could be no ordination on the basis of only one year's attendance at the college.¹⁰ According to *Die Deborah*: "The Hebrew Union College authorities refused to sign his certificate of graduating because Freuder was not a regular student and was in fact a student of the Orthodox Seminary in Berlin, and there he finally got his certificate."¹¹



Hebrew Union College in its first permanent building in downtown Cincinnati, ca. 1890s (American Jewish Archives)

This final claim is in fact almost certainly false; there is no other record of Freuder obtaining a certificate in Berlin, and Freuder himself never mentions such a thing. It is tempting to speculate that this statement was part of a campaign by Wise to use *Die Deborah* to distance himself as much as possible from his former student. The *American Israelite*, Wise's flagship newspaper, stated in the same edition¹² that Wise signed a Semicha certificate for Freuder on the basis of his earlier studies at the Berlin Orthodox Seminary.¹³ However, the Semicha was not signed by the other officers of the Hebrew Union College, because Freuder was not graduating from that institution.¹⁴ According to the article, Wise's action was a gesture of mercy to save the penniless, jobless immigrant from "starvation and utter ruin."

During his months in Cincinnati, Freuder began attending churches on Sundays, "only for the sake of seeing how the preaching is done."¹⁵ The fall of 1884 should presumably have seen him returning to classes, but instead he took a job serving as rabbi to a small congregation in Georgia, possibly in Macon, because he claims to have received his bachelor of arts degree in 1885 from Mercer University in Macon.¹⁶ Minutes of a meeting at Hebrew Union College in the fall of that year indicate that Freuder was petitioning to do his senior year in absentia. Professor Moses Mielziner moved that it was acceptable, and the petition was granted.¹⁷ On April 9, 1886, the minutes of another meeting include a letter from Freuder, addressed at Rochester, New York, thanking the college and "hoping that I may be found

deserving of that kindness."¹⁸

Religious radicalism caused problems early in Freuder's career. One historian of the Jews in Minnesota writes that "Freuder's ministry in St. Paul evoked strong party feelings in his congregation. His very radicalism stiffened the back of the traditional element. The internal conflict at Mount Zion was not resolved until Freuder had left."¹⁹ Another account suggested that "He fled as a thief."²⁰ When Freuder went to Ashland for a wedding, one member hoped "that by the time he returns he will be in better humor and try to please his congregation with good lectures, so his audience will enjoy them instead of staying away, as he expresses himself."²¹ He had become known as a radical reformer with talent but no tact.

Freuder moved on to San Diego, California, and between February and June 1888 he served the congregation of Beth Israel there.²² It would seem from reports that he moderated his impatience to push the congregation to make radical reforms, and he established an excellent relationship with the sixty or so families of the congregation. A very positive article on him appeared in the *San Diego Daily Bee*, September 16, 1888, and was reprinted in the *American Israelite*:

Rabbi Freuder, who has so well and acceptably served this congregation, was as a matter of course, re-elected by a unanimous vote. A large congregation assembled last night at Keener Chapel, where the Jewish congregation hold their services. The Rabbi, referring to his unanimous reelection, gracefully acknowledged the compliment.²³

The paper went on to congratulate the congregation for "securing the services of their scholarly and popular rabbi for another year," described Freuder as "a man of culture, refinement and liberal scholarship" and "a speaker of rare eloquence . . . rare judgement and sound senses," and concluded by celebrating the fact "that he has determined to permanently cast his lot with San Diego."²⁴

Shortly thereafter, another upbeat article about the Jewish community in San Diego appeared in the *American Israelite*. This time it had been written especially for the newspaper by a San Diego Jew calling himself Josephus:

Many of our co-religionists, attracted by the boom, have come here to stay and the number of Jewish families has increased ten fold during the past year. A congregation has recently been organized.... At present Rabbi Freuder conducts the services at the Methodist Church South. The most cordial feeling exist between Jews and Gentiles, and quite a number of Gentiles attend the Jewish services. Since Dr. Freuder has put his foot down on spiritualism, its devotees are out of spirits.²⁵

Spiritualism was quite popular among Jews at this time but such approaches were not compatible with Freuder's extremely rationalistic version of classical Reform Judaism.²⁶ Judging from the report by "Josephus," Freuder must have been well respected by the congregation as his disapproval of Spiritualism obviously discouraged it.

Whatever the *San Diego Daily Bee's* hopes of September 1888, Freuder did not "permanently cast his lot with San Diego."²⁷ However, when he left in mid-1889, he was regarded as having done a great service to the temple. Under his leadership, the congregation had begun plans to build their own building, and their presence in the general community was strengthened.

Despite this development, Freuder clearly perceived his own rabbinical career as a failure. He quotes a letter he received from his mentor Isaac Mayer Wise in 1887 while serving his second congregation in Saint Paul, Minnesota. "What tells against you," Wise says after offering some faint praise on other grounds, "is that you have only a few friends because you are unmindful of the Puk Chazi Mo Ame Debar (go out and observe the people outdoors). You want to figure as an authority without having had time enough to acquire the confidence and the good-will of the public."²⁸

Freuder's lugubrious comment was this: "I failed to heed the good counsel of my best friend, and his words 'otherwise you will spoil your whole career' proved to be a true prophecy."²⁹

Why Freuder felt he had to move from congregation to congregation and why, in his own evaluation of his rabbinical career, he chose to ignore the positive aspects and dwell on the negative is unknown. But whatever the psychological roots of his unhappiness, in 1891, while serving the Jewish community of Davenport, Iowa, he resolved to leave the religion of his fathers.

A substantial number of Jews converted to Christianity at the end

of the nineteenth century. The majority did not return to the fold.³⁰ Of those who did, some were intellectuals of note, such as the biblical scholar Arnold B. Ehrlich,³¹ and others were rabbis, such as Henry Gersoni,³² Jacob Mayer,³³ and Emanuel Marcussohn.³⁴ But, as Timothy Weber says, "None... did so with more bravado than Samuel Freuder."³⁵

Freuder is one of three rabbinic graduates of the Hebrew Union College who converted to Christianity³⁶ between the founding of the college in 1875 and the end of the nineteenth century,³⁷ but he was the only one to return to Judaism. The other two converts were Max Wertheimer and Joseph Moses. Wertheimer was ordained in 1889 and converted to Christian Science in 1900. In 1904, he became a Baptist, serving that church as a missionary until his death in 1941.³⁸ Joseph Moses, whose original name was Moses Jerusalemki, was ordained in 1894 and converted to Episcopalianism in 1901.³⁹

Shortly after Moses' conversion to Christianity, the *Jewish Comment* expressed concern:

The conversion of two rabbis to Christianity within a period of a little over a year is rather a startling record, and one that ought to engage more than passing attention. When Wertheimer embraced Christian Science his choice was cited as evidence of mental weakness, but the argument will have to be changed in the case of Rabbi Moses, who went over last week to the Episcopal Church. It is given out that the seeds of apostasy were sown in Moses in the Old Country by Christian peasants who worked on his father's plantation. The Russian peasant, if Tolstoi paints him truly, is the last person in the world who is likely to influence an educated man to a change of faith, and it is altogether likely that Rabbi Moses has been brought to his present pass by conditions that have surrounded him since he reached man's estate, namely, American conditions. Given a half-hearted rabbi and a half-hearted congregation, and [*sic*] lapses from faith are the natural order of things. Half-heartedness is characteristic of those whose religion is all breadth and no depth, and we set great store by our breadth of thought—in religion we are all liberals.⁴⁰

The editorial went on to decry the lack of clear boundaries between liberal Jewish and liberal Christian belief. The editor expressed no surprise that, with so little difference between the two

religions, some Jews converted.

The editorial expressed a significant truth. Many Reform rabbis held radical religious views,⁴¹ and many came very close to Unitarianism or other types of liberal Christianity. Felix Adler, the son of the rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York, left Judaism to form the Society for Ethical Culture.⁴² Others contemplated similar possibilities.⁴³

Freuder—like the other two Hebrew Union College converts to Christianity—was referred to periodically in the context of intra-Jewish polemics over the authenticity of Reform Judaism. In 1911 Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz of Johannesburg, later to become the chief rabbi of the British Empire, wrote an article stating his belief that Reform Judaism invariably led people to apostasy. Gotthard Deutsch, professor of Jewish history at Hebrew Union College, responded angrily to a specific comment by Hertz that he could fill an entire book with the Hebrew Union College graduates who had become Christians:

Let him write the volume! I pledge myself to raise the funds necessary for its publication. I have been connected with the Hebrew Union College for twenty years, and know all its graduates, and therefore can state positively that there were no more than three conversions among its graduates. Samuel Freuder, the first of the converts, returned to Judaism, declaring the whole missionary business a fraud, and is living now a



Gotthard Deutsch, 1859–1921
(American Jewish Archives)

retired life, earning only a modest livelihood. Max Wertheimer turned out a failure as a Christian Science practitioner, and entered the Baptist ministry. Jerusalem Moses, originally Moses Jerusalemiski, was a capable, and in my opinion, a perfectly honest young man who, on account of his objectionable foreign accent, could not hold a position in the Jewish ministry, and in despair embraced Christianity which, as I understand, he deeply regretted since.⁴⁴

Deutsch went on to point out that all three apostates had been raised Orthodox (Wertheimer in Germany, Freuder in Hungary, and Moses in Poland) and that there was as much reason to blame this back-

ground for their apostasy as their American experience.⁴⁵

Perhaps Freuder's hope was that Christianity and a career as a missionary would bring him the sense of satisfaction that had eluded him as a rabbi. He was a spontaneous man, and it is unclear how long he had been contemplating changing his religion. But the fact that he went on to serve as a Christian missionary for almost two decades would certainly indicate that he understood what he was doing and that he had every intention of serving his newfound faith.

Freuder, and men like him, were valuable to Christian missionaries. Indeed, during the Gilded Age certain evangelical Christian sects, especially premillennialists, made Jews the prime focus of their conversionary activities. The desire of premillennialists to convert Jews to Jesus, and their belief that they could be much more successful in this task than other missionaries, led them to establish their own missions. The Chicago Hebrew Mission was set up by William E. Blackstone and others in 1887.⁴⁶ Eventually it had its own reading room, industrial school, temporary home for new Jewish converts, and day nursery for the children of working mothers. It published the *Jewish Era* and had a staff of twenty-three people conducting preaching services, mothers' meetings, a kindergarten, house-to-house visitation, and literature distribution. The mission sponsored "Conferences on Behalf of Israel" in which noted premillennialist speakers like James M. Gray, Robert McWatty Russell, A. E. Thompson, A. B. Simpson, John Timothy Stone, B. B. Sutcliffe, and William E. Blackstone analyzed Jewish aspects of biblical prophecy.⁴⁷

Christian millennialism—the belief that there will be a long period of utopian peace and righteousness directly connected to the second coming of the Messiah—was an important influence on American Protestant Evangelicals in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ There were several versions of the doctrine,⁴⁹ but most significant to Freuder's story were the premillennial futurists, who believed that Christ would return before the millennial reign and would establish that reign, and that these prophecies would all be fulfilled during a short period of frenetic activity immediately preceding his return.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, American Protestant Evangelicals were mostly premillennialist futurists. But they were also pretribulational dispensationalists, which is to say that they saw God as recognizing two distinct peoples: on the one hand, disobedient Israel; on the other, the church, to which God's attention had (for now) turned.

Like many other Protestants, these premillennialists were intensely interested in converting Jews to Christ.⁵⁰ However, because of their unique view (among Protestants) that the existence of an independent Jewish state would play a crucial millennial role, they were also ardent Zionists. Their view was, in Timothy Weber's words, that:

After the partial re-gathering of the Jews in Palestine and the re-establishment of the state of Israel would come the ill-fated pact with the Antichrist, betrayal at his hands, immense suffering for those Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah before his coming, and the final invasion by hordes of Gentile armies.... When the Gentile powers had the Jews close to total annihilation, Jesus Christ would return to earth, slaughter the Antichrist's armies, and finally establish the kingdom that he had originally offered to the Jews at his first advent. After witnessing his majestic display of power, the Jews would acknowledge Messiah Jesus and once again bask in the blessings of God.⁵¹

It followed, in their view, that only premillennialists, agreeing as they did with Jews that the Old Testament prophecies would be fulfilled, really understood how to evangelize Jews successfully. James Brookes's assessment was typical; it was, he said, "most important to show them that their hope is founded upon the coming of Messiah."⁵² Arno C. Gaebelein put it even more strongly, arguing that nonmillenarian Christians were "wholly unfit to deal with the Jews" because "the true way to present the Gospel to the Jews is to show them the truth of the two advents in the Old Testament, and also how the New Testament looks forward to the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom."⁵³

These Christian premillennialists worked hard to influence Jewish immigrants. Although far less successful than they had hoped, they did reach some intellectually or emotionally vulnerable Jews. Freuder was one of them, and he was baptized at the Chicago Hebrew Mission in 1891.⁵⁴ According to his account, about one hundred people turned out for the ceremony, and they were mostly Jews from the neighborhood.⁵⁵ The service, with the Reverend H. M. Scott officiating, opened with a hymn, followed by a prayer and the reading of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah.

Then Professor Scott took a goblet from the table, and pouring some water into his palm, he let it drop slowly over the crown of my head, while he pronounced the usual formula of baptism. Little did I dream then what a sea of trouble these few drops of water were preparing for me. Several addresses by missionary friends followed. I made some remarks myself, but I have never been able for the life of me to recall what I said. During the singing of the closing hymn most of the Jews present rose to their feet, and left the room with ill-suppressed disgust and anger. A few of them, on reaching the door, turned around and shouted to me, "How much did you get for this?" At the conclusion of the service my newly-made Christian friends gathered about me and showered upon me the heartiest congratulations, coupled with the most confident predictions of a happy life both here and hereafter.⁵⁶

At this time Freuder was actively considering two possible courses—becoming a minister or a missionary. But as he later recalled, he did not feel able to "perform the various Christian ceremonies used at baptisms, marriages, and funerals in a devout, believing spirit, and to go through them in a perfunctory manner, as many a minister does, would have been irksome and distasteful. So I chose the alternative that demands no pastoral duties except preaching. Accordingly, I started my first missionary work in 1894, in Boston, Massachusetts."⁵⁷

After the baptism, he studied at the Chicago Theological Seminary, which was affiliated to the Congregationalists, and after three years of study he received a bachelor of divinity degree. At about this time he met Edward S. Niles, a Boston dentist who was a leader in the missionizing movement. Evangelism toward Jews was going on in all the major cities at this time, and most of this activity had a pre-millennialist origin. In many respects this effort took exactly the form it took for other immigrant groups—tutorials in English that relied heavily on the New Testament as a text, for example. But it was understood that evangelizing Jews was an especially difficult task,⁵⁸ and this perception made Freuder's rabbinical background look like an ideal qualification—in theory. Niles recommended Freuder to the Reverend Joshua Coit. Freuder was appointed as a missionary to the Jews and was given a salary of \$800, despite the fact that the usual salary for such a position was \$500.

Freuder found the work frustrating, and, disappointed that so few Jews converted, after only five months he tendered his resignation. According to an account in the *Boston Globe*:

the spiritual results were not as much as the missionary himself had expected. Beside this, he was troubled over the fact that he had lost standing with Hebrews of the Jewish faith. He became discouraged, and finally went to Dr. Coit, relinquished his salary and resigned his position, giving as his reason that he had not been able to reach the class of Jews which he wanted to.⁵⁹

Moving to New York, Freuder tried to become a businessman; this endeavor also failed, and after a few months he returned to Boston where he worked as a book agent.⁶⁰ He then began "a wandering life" as a lecturer, often giving a talk on "The Hebrews of Today."⁶¹

It is clear that Jewish hostility to his role as a missionary lecturer contributed greatly to his demoralization. In 1891, *Die Deborah* published a scathing report claiming that Freuder was "a nothing and he lives somewhere in Chicago as a lunatic, and operates as a street preacher. This cannot last for long, because he works nowhere and for a long time has not been working in his own profession."⁶² It was reported that he owed \$400 to Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the editor of *Die Deborah*, and owed additional sums to many other people. The newspaper account also disputed Freuder's ordination by Hebrew Union College and described him as a compulsive borrower and a worthless vagrant. *Die Deborah* opined that as Freuder was in debt to Jews all over America, "the only way left for him was to find another society, which he could draw from."⁶³ In conclusion it was reported that Freuder had never done an honest thing in his life and that he was lucky to have found any organization willing to tolerate him.

It should be noted that this is very much the way that Isaac Mayer Wise described Jewish converts to Christianity generally. Wise wrote: "Among the many missionaries whom I have met, the converted Jews were rascals without exception. To my regret, many of these returned later to the Jewish fold."⁶⁴ Wise resented all former Jews who became Jewish missionaries and, furthermore, he harbored personal resentment against Freuder, his former student who had—as Wise would have seen it—betrayed him.

Wise's sentiment toward apostates was shared by large segments of the Jewish community. Such individuals were deeply resented for abandoning the faith of their fathers, and it was anticipated that they would try to return to Judaism before their deaths. As early as 1875 the *Jewish Messenger* quoted England's chief rabbi as saying that an apostate "will entreat some Israelite to attend to him in his last moments; he will, if conscious, beg to be buried amongst his former people; he will respect the declaration of the unity of God; it is the way with most of these apostates."⁶⁵

Freuder faced this hostility most directly in his dealings with Jewish immigrants. Extreme hostility toward the Christian missionary *meshumed* is perhaps unsurprising, especially inasmuch as many Jewish immigrants had come to the United States mainly to escape from savage anti-Semitism in Europe.⁶⁶ Evangelism and anti-Semitism were perhaps not easy to distinguish, and as a result evangelical work could even be hazardous.

One lad who assisted his father's mission learned a valuable lesson on how *not* to distribute Christian handbills in a Jewish tenement. The first few times he passed out the literature, he started at the bottom of the tenement and worked his way to the top. But by the time he reached the upper floors, the tenants below had absorbed the nature of the material. With cries of "Meshumed" (apostate), the tenement dwellers let go a barrage of hot soup, pots and pans, and assorted garbage. "Thus I learned that the next time I went into a tenement house, I must start on the top floor and work down."⁶⁷

Perhaps even more significant than Jewish hatred of apostate missionaries was the lack of full acceptance in Christian circles. While it is unclear how much emotional support Freuder received from the missionary community, it was a well-known fact that Jewish converts to Christianity had an extremely difficult time adjusting socially to their new religious society. Jonathan Sarna writes that many of the Hebrew-Christian missionaries were very lonely primarily on account of their position, being not fully part of any one group. They were, as Sarna says, trying to make a virtue out of a necessity. "Its members, usually first-generation converts from Judaism, were lonely, marginal men. Christians viewed them as Jews; Jews viewed them as Christians. Full-fledged members of neither group, Hebrew-

Christians set up a religious organization of their own. They developed an ideology in which they played a pre-eminent role. They justified their aloofness by pointing to their special status in God's millennial plan."⁶⁸ Jacob Rader Marcus agreed, writing that "the Christians themselves rarely accepted converts wholeheartedly. For Christians these neophytes always remained Jews."⁶⁹ Although the premillennialists emphasized that the Jews were the chosen people, and although they were therefore outspoken against anti-Semitism, they remained deeply ambivalent.⁷⁰

Freuder was a lifelong bachelor, and the lack of a family probably contributed to his instability. It is possible to speculate as to why he never married,⁷¹ but Freuder's own explanation is plausible enough:

While I was among the Christians, I could not, of course, marry a Jewess, and to marry a Christian girl who would look upon me as a sincere Christian believer, would have, in my unsettled state of mind concerning Christianity, amounted to a crime. But how about a converted Jewess? Well, they are very scarce, and the ones I did meet in my long experience were already married, their baptism forming a sort of prelude to their marriage to a Christian.⁷²

His alienation from Christianity grew steadily. In 1896 and again in 1900, he tried "to escape from the anomalous life of a converted Jew." He saved some money and then, according to his account, went to at least two different Jewish leaders to ask their advice:

A prominent orthodox Rabbi⁷³ on whom I called, received me in a brotherly way, admonished me to remain steadfast in my good resolve, and promised me his help in getting some kind of work. Quite different was the reception accorded me by another Rabbi, who asked me bluntly: "How much money have you got?" I told him. "What can you do with a few hundred dollars?" He asked derisively. "You'd better stay with the Christians until you have saved up some more money."⁷⁴

For a month Freuder worked as a waiter, but his knee began causing difficulties. He then began lecturing again to Christian audiences, but he remained deeply fascinated with Judaism and his lecture topics remained focused on Jews. In 1902 he again changed direction,

transferring his church membership from the Congregationalists to the Episcopalians; no evidence seems to have survived that would indicate why, beyond the general instability and chronic emotional angst that he exhibits elsewhere in his behavior. But perhaps even this explanation is unnecessary: we have seen that Freuder had reservations about the whole business of conversion, and he was by no means the only convert to "shop around" among the Christian denominations before settling down. Max Wertheimer, for example, became a Christian Scientist in 1900 and then a Baptist in 1904. Wertheimer, on the other hand, remained a Baptist until his death in 1941, whereas Freuder's spiritual wandering was far from over. In 1905 he studied at the Episcopal Divinity School in Philadelphia while continuing to work at the Episcopal Jewish Mission there. He was ordained as a deacon and served on the clerical staff in Philadelphia and at Grace Episcopal Church in New York. At this time he again felt overwhelmed by the need to rejoin the Jewish people and the Jewish religion.

But hard as I tried to quiet my conscience and persuade myself that I was doing some good in the world, I had no rest. I felt miserable and wretched. In vain I endeavored to silence the accusing voice of my father, with its echo of three thousand years, calling me back to the sacred hearth of Judaism around which the holy and noble aspirations of my childhood centered. When, therefore, the invitation came to me to attend the Boston meeting of Jewish missionaries, I seized the opportunity to declare myself in a way which would make a recall impossible.⁷⁵

Dr. Niles, the president of the Boston council responsible for organizing the Third Sabbatical Hebrew-Messianic Conference of 1908, had written to Freuder inviting him to attend the conference and give a lecture on a topic of his choice. Freuder accepted the invitation and wrote that he would speak on "Christ in the Talmud." At the conference, Freuder gave no warning of a change in subject matter. He responded "with appropriate words" to Niles's greeting of welcome, "and everyone looked forward with pleasant expectancy to this formal address."⁷⁶

What they heard, instead, was a decisive personal announcement. During seventeen years as a Christian, Freuder announced, he had not achieved the fulfillment and happiness for which he had hoped. He

intended to resign from Christian missionary work and return to Judaism. First he would explain his views on Christian missions to American Jews.

I do not believe that missions, as they are conducted, are worth anything. I take a broad view, and although what I am to say may not be welcome, I shall speak not in a spirit of criticism but of amity. The criticism against missions is twofold: First, that those in the work don't believe what they are preaching; and second that the missionary is in it for the money. I have never baptized a Jew. I have been a rector for some time in Philadelphia and there I baptized Gentiles—but never a Jew. You don't know what it means and costs for a Jew to be baptized—the rended soul, the disrupted family, the desertion of friends, the loss of respect. How can you expect that a Jew who has forsaken the faith of his fathers can sing: "O, happy day that fixed my choice"? I tell you there is no happy day for him. The name of Christ and Christianity has so long been associated with the wrongs, sufferings, sorrows and persecutions of the Jews, that an Israelite can never forget it.⁷⁷

Freuder then compared Christianity to Judaism, suggesting that Judaism was the religion of "pure monotheism." But more important to Freuder than the religious polemic was the fact that trying to convert Jews to Christianity caused great harm to the Jews involved.

The Jew stands for pure monotheism, but the Christian does not, for he has set up Christ as a divine object of worship, for which no authority is given in the Bible. How, then, shall Christianity lead a Jew to be a better man or lead a better life than he would if he had followed his mother instead of running away with his stepmother?... It is like falling between two stools—they will come to the ground. From this day forth, I will never baptize a Jew or anybody else, for I won't make anybody suffer as I have for the last 17 years.... I warn you Christians to be careful what you do in taking a Jewish child away from his family, so that you can make a Christian disciple.⁷⁸

Freuder also spoke of his future plans and of the problems he would now have to face alone. He acknowledged that life would not

be easy. His career as a missionary was obviously at an end now that he had alienated himself from the Christian missionary movement, and he could hardly expect to return to his earlier profession as a rabbi. He had proved unsuccessful in business, and he had no relatives in a position to assist him. "I don't know where I shall go, or what I shall do. I have no money and no family. My church will no longer fellowship with me, of course, and perhaps the Jews will not."⁷⁹ But I can still fellowship with the dead prophets, saints and martyrs."⁸⁰

The Christian missionary organizations had faced a great deal of criticism—not only from Jews, but from Christians as well—and Niles apparently had heard the various charges before. While he was momentarily stunned by Freuder's sudden outburst—as were the other assembled participants—he responded with a dignified and balanced reply. Because he had known Freuder over a period of many years, Niles had seen the difficulties Freuder had experienced. After Freuder finished, Niles rose and tried to explain the situation. Freuder, he said, had been a truly converted Christian, and if Freuder had found Christians to be cold and wrong, it was because he had focused on their negative attributes rather than their positive traits. Niles admitted that he understood that Jews who converted to Christianity faced sorrow and suffering of the soul but added that he sincerely believed that the joy, gladness, and peace that Christianity could bring such an individual could more than compensate. Finally he pleaded: "Brother Freuder, I know your sorrow and tribulations; but don't go away. Don't turn your back on all you have believed and taught for 17 years. Let us on our knees take it all to God."⁸¹ In his own account of what happened that day, Freuder wrote:

No longer able to resist the prompting of my better self, I stood up in the historic Park Street Church of Boston—June 3, 1908—and "in open meeting" declared my return to the Jewish fold. It was a supreme moment of my life. It was then that I learned what it means to be inspired. The experience of that single hour amply compensated for the sorrows and miseries of many years.

During the singing of the hymn which preceded my address, I looked at the professional converts in the congregation—there were about twenty of them—and they appeared to me as grasshoppers compared with the intellectual and moral

giants of the true Israel. I closed my eyes, and there rose before my mind's eye a vast multitude of Jewish men and women who had given up their lives rather than deny their faith. In my imagination I saw a long procession of these noble martyrs file through the front door of the church and line up against the wall, while a very old man took a seat right in front of me, and kept gazing at me with a smile of forgiveness and welcome on his glorified face. It was my father.⁸²

Although he encountered many problems, he found solace in his return to Judaism and declared: "If ever I preach in any Christian pulpit again, may my right hand forget its cunning and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."⁸³

According to Freuder's own account, his idea for a book (originally, the subject was to be Jewish missionaries) came in 1911.

Having plenty of material stored away in my mind, I thought that I could put it down in writing within a few months. All I needed was just money enough to live on while I was engaged in preparing the book. A friend suggested that he would give me the names of ten persons who would be willing to advance me ten dollars each. Some of these men responded, but it took so much time to see them, that after three months had passed, I had written but one chapter. And so I had to stop writing and do some work of more immediate financial returns. But the idea of the book had taken such strong hold of me that I returned to it as soon as I had earned enough money to keep me going for a little while. Like a "stage-struck" young lady, I had become "book-struck," and no advice of friends could dissuade me from realizing my plans.

At last, in 1913, I hurried with the completed manuscript to a well-known publisher. I was told to return for an answer in two weeks. When I did return, I was told to return again in four weeks, when my book was politely rejected. Another publisher wanted me to pay the cost of printing in advance, which, of course, I was unable to do. Finally, I decided to get advance subscriptions and become my own publisher.

And so, after almost two years had elapsed since the completion of my manuscript, I had just enough money to pay the printing expenses. As for the binding, I had to do it piecemeal, as the binder was not optimistic enough to let me have more books than I could pay for on delivery. This resulted in my inability to send review copies to the papers and to other necessary advertising. The book was therefore printed, but far from being published, in the sense of being offered to the public. Only a thousand copies were printed. After delivering the copies subscribed and paid for in advance, I was left with about 500 copies, which I disposed of within a period of four months, when I found myself suddenly with neither money nor books left.

But I had the great satisfaction of having my book favorably regarded by the reviewers, and bitterly denounced by the Jewish missionaries. One of the latter gentry publicly threatened to have me arrested for libel. How empty his threat was may be seen from the fact that three years after the appearance of my book, there was published a pamphlet by Colonel Alexander S. Bacon, a prominent attorney and a member of the Baptist Church, in which that missionary is called all kinds of names, including his right name, and yet the one so called did not dare to go into court as plaintiff in a libel action.

I still clung to the hope of being able to get out a large edition of the book and put it in the hands of the well-meaning but deluded missionary patrons, when the entry of our country in the World War made it imperative to postpone this venture for the time being.

After being temporarily employed as proofreader of the new English translation of the Hebrew Bible published by the Jewish Publication Society of America, I found permanent employment with the same society as one of their representatives in soliciting membership and getting orders for their various publications. While engaged in this work, I shrank from being known as the author of a book, the more so since the book was dead. But on occasions when I ran across a man who had read it, I found a hearty welcome and an eager readiness to assist me in my work.

I was getting along nicely, having even a little bank account, which, small as it was, made the idea of printing my book loom large in my mind, when at the beginning of the year 1921 I was laid up with rheumatism, which kept me from my work for more than three months. This illness, however, was a blessing in disguise, resulting as it did in arousing the sympathy of the well known and public spirited gentleman, Mr. Joseph Barondess, who, ever ready to help me in my struggles of many years past, was now determined to put new life both into the book and the author. Mr. Barondess co-operated with the Rev. Dr. Elias Margolis of Mount Vernon, N.Y.⁸⁴

In his preface to the third edition Freuder expresses his "heartfelt thanks to the committee which has assisted me in bringing out this... edition," and he is especially proud that "In this committee there are Rabbis and laymen, Zionists and Non-Zionists, Orthodox and Reformed. It is a truly representative Jewish committee, illustrating the broadminded, forgiving, and loving spirit of Judaism."⁸⁵

In 1914, when the autobiography was about to be published, the *American Israelite* (founded by Freuder's original mentor, Isaac Mayer Wise, but by then edited by his son, Leo Wise) published a positive notice:

Samuel Freuder, who at one time was a missionary, and later repented, and has since become a respectable member of the New York Jewish community, has according to report a book in press which it is said, will expose the work of the missionaries who labor among the Jews. Whatever the merits of the book it will be interesting reading in that it will probably cite concrete examples of what we all know to be a general truth, viz., that the "Missionaries who labor among the Jews" are about the slickest set of rascals that ever escaped the penitentiary.⁸⁶

In fact the merits of the book were esteemed quite highly, for example in the *American Hebrew*, a New York paper known for its conservative positions. The lead review ran to several hundred words and said, inter alia, that "[Freuder] writes with evident sincerity and the book thus becomes a psychological document of considerable interest and importance.... [He] altogether leaves the impression of rare truthfulness... and the book contains several striking and useful chapters on

other missionaries."⁸⁷

Freuder had apparently been warned that he would face hostility on reentering the Jewish community, but he is at pains to say that this was the opposite of what he found.⁸⁸ It is worth quoting at length the contrasting accounts he gives of his first Passover as Christian and his first after he had returned to Judaism:

Within the walls of the Chicago Theological Seminary, where I lived as a student, the approaching Easter festival—the Christian substitute for the Jewish Passover—was uppermost in the minds of all, and the air was filled with the sufferings and crucifixion of Jesus, for which the Jews—of course, only the ancient ones—are held responsible according to New Testament writers, who seemed to have a grudge against the Jews. So often were the Jews mentioned in the lessons and chapel exercises that it made me nervous. The transition from the ancient to the modern Jews is so natural and easy that I was in constant fear lest the harsh names given the Jews of old might be applied to their living descendants. But, I am glad to state, it was never done. The professors and students of the Seminary were absolutely free from the anti-Semitic spirit which sometimes claims its victims even among the disciples of Jesus, who was born a Jew.

On the other hand, when walking the streets I was reminded by the display of *Matzah* signs in the stores that the Passover, a festival around which cluster the sweetest memories of my boyhood, was near at hand. I fell ill. The doctor treated me for spring fever. But what ailed me was the fever of the soul in conflict with itself.

When the *Seder* night arrived, I stayed in my room seeking forgetfulness by doing my Greek lesson. But it was of no avail. I felt an uncontrollable desire to get at least a glimpse of the *Seder* from the outside. So I shut my book with more than necessary force, hurried down stairs, and took the car for the Ghetto. There I wandered about in the deserted streets, looking wistfully at the tenement houses, all bright with the light of both modern gas and old-fashioned oil lamps. Now and then I would steal close to a half-opened window, only to get

a glimpse of the *Seder* table, and perchance catch a strain of the old-time melodies so familiar to me from childhood. In my highly wrought-up state of mind I discovered in every white-bearded person sitting at the head of the table a likeness to my beloved father, who was then still living, in ignorance of my change.

Wine could never affect me as it does others, or else I should have emptied more than the prescribed four cups that night. I walked about until I could stand it no longer. Then I rushed back to my room, threw myself without undressing on my bed, and merciful sleep gave back to me all that I had lost. In my dreams I was a boy again at my father's table.⁸⁹

The mood of his first seder as a returned Jew is strikingly different:

The Passover arrived, and I found myself seated at the *Seder* table presided over by Rabbi I. S. Moses of what is now the Central synagogue, New York City. The arrangements at the table were all in strict accordance with the old-time traditions. The hostess, although born and bred in this country, had everything prepared just as her mother used to do, allowing not a jot or tittle to be left out. Her conservative nature made her also keep a sharp eye on her husband lest he deviate from the traditional course of the service. She could not control his sermons, but as for the *Seder* she was determined to make him walk the straight and narrow path, and he had submitted to her will in this matter for the last thirty-six years. But one can never tell when a tendency to disregard mere forms will break loose.⁹⁰ So when the point of the service was reached when, according to the rubric, one should lean back and drink of the cup, he, instead, leaned over towards me, brought his glass in contact with mine, and with kindness beaming in his eyes said: "Here's to your happy future!" Insignificant as this little incident may appear, yet it made me supremely happy, by removing the last vestige of doubt concerning the Jewish attitude toward one who has gone astray.⁹¹

Freuder went on to contrast this experience specifically with the Christian claim that Judaism is characterized by harsh, unbending laws while Christianity has a monopoly of grace, love, and forgiveness.⁹²

Despite the “respectability” alleged by the *American Israelite*, Freuder had in fact returned to Judaism with painfully few resources. He worked as a porter in a department store, as a vegetable peddler, and then, with a loan from the Board of Jewish Ministers, as a trader at auctions. Regarding the latter enterprise, Freuder commented dryly that he “managed to buy some things cheap, but when it came to the selling of them I was ‘sold,’ so to speak.”⁹³ Next he tried teaching English to young manual workers at thirty cents per lesson. In this way he “managed to fill the evenings pretty well, and my income amounted to about eight dollars a week. The trouble, however, was that sometimes they had to work overtime, and consequently had no time for the lesson, and at other times again work was ‘slack,’ and they had plenty of time, but no money to pay for the lessons.”⁹⁴ At the same time, he was contributing occasionally to the *Hebrew Standard*.

Thirteen years after his declaration at the Boston conference, Freuder wrote out an imaginary bar mitzvah address to commemorate the thirteenth anniversary of his return to Judaism:

Brethren: Looking back over the past thirteen years, I can triumphantly say that during all that time there was never a moment when I regretted my return to Judaism. True, instead of partaking of the proverbial fatted calf prepared for the prodigal son, I had to struggle hard for the bare necessities of life. But what did all the inconveniences and hardships amount to when compared to the priceless satisfaction of being once more a true and loyal Jew? You remember the Talmudic saying, “Yesh koneh olamo be-sh ah ahah,”⁹⁵ which means, there are those who acquire their share of bliss of the future life in a single hour (instead of having to work for it, as others do, for many years). Paraphrasing that sentence, I might say that I have acquired a world of unalloyed and everlasting happiness when in a single hour in Boston, thirteen years ago—as I have already related in the first chapter—I sacrificed on the altar of Judaism a secure position in the Christian Church with good prospects of a life of comfort and ease.⁹⁶

Noting that he had been inspired by a “love for Judaism”⁹⁷ that had been engendered when he was a child and could not be extinguished, Freuder acknowledged the foolhardiness of those who “forsake the

living springs of the Jewish religion and life."⁹⁸ To illustrate his point he used a fable about a fox who tried to trick some fish into jumping out of the water so that they might escape being caught in a net. The fish, however, knew better than to trust the fox and replied that if they could not face danger when in their own element they would surely be lost in a foreign element.

The belief that conversion to another religion was detrimental to all was not new to Freuder. He had voiced the same idea in his speech at the Boston conference, when he said to both Jews and Christians: "If you are satisfied with your faith, stick to it, and God bless you."⁹⁹ Having suffered during his absence from the religion of his forefathers, Freuder felt that he had a greater appreciation of Judaism and that, having returned to the fold, the richness of Judaism had contributed significantly to his appreciation of life.

A certain philosopher has pointed out the strange fact that the three most precious things in life, youth, health and liberty, are only appreciated after we are deprived of them. Alas! This is just what happened to me with regard to Judaism, which I began to appreciate properly only after I had lost it. But having found it again, I am more than ever convinced of its incomparable truth and beauty and of its being "a tree of life to those that lay hold of it." Brethren: Thirty years ago I deserted the tents of Jacob to find shelter in the Christian camp. I made a grievous mistake. Oh that I had heeded the lesson contained in that fable of Rabbi Akiva as the Talmud tells it to us...

I have just mentioned the three most precious things in life, namely youth, health and liberty. These three things Judaism has most abundantly. Judaism has youth. Though old in years, it is like Moses, of whom it is written, "His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated." Let those of our impetuous youth who look with disdain upon the furrowed face of Judaism bear in mind that it is not the wrinkles in the face but the wrinkles in the heart that make a person old, and the heart of our beloved mother Judaism beats as soundly and strong today as ever.

Judaism has health. Its well-balanced mind steers clear of gross materialism on the one hand and sickly sentimentalism on the other. Like Jacob's ladder, it is set upon earth, but the

top of it reaches heaven. "The Torah," our sages say, "was not given to angels" nor does it aim to make angels out of men, but plain red-blooded men zealous for truth and righteousness.

Judaism has liberty. While chattel slavery was grudgingly tolerated in the early period of Hebrew civilization, mental slavery was always repugnant and intolerable to the Jewish mind. The most heroic deeds recorded in the annals of mankind are those performed by Jews in the fight for liberty of conscience. In the midst of Judaism, a Spanish Inquisition could never have reared its ugly head. And yet those who sing the praises of Christianity speak so glibly of Jewish "bigotry and narrow-mindedness." In fact, however, the true spirit of Judaism looks upon liberty of conscience as the most sacred birthright of man in whom dwelleth the spirit of God.¹⁰⁰

Freuder reiterated his belief that the Christian missionaries were not representative of Christianity and were not a positive force—even within the Christian world. In fact his published view of Christian missionary work was critical in the extreme; he accused missionaries of, among other things, falsifying records to exaggerate their success and pressuring their converts to lie about their life as Jews. He felt that they were characteristically quite ignorant about what conversion really meant for Jews in spiritual terms.¹⁰¹ In his preface to the third edition (written in May 1924), he writes:

It is but natural, that being—in the words of the Psalmist—"like a bird that escaped from the snare of the fowlers" I should make every effort to prevent any of my people from falling into the snares laid by "converted" soul-hunters in the Jewish missions to be found in almost every large city.

How can I be silent while these Jewish missionaries seek to ensnare Jewish men and women and to lure even children of tender age away from the faith of their parents?

According to a conservative estimate, over two million dollars are spent annually by the Jewish missions established in this country and abroad. This money is contributed by well-meaning Christians who are eager "to save Jewish souls." There can be

no doubt that as the facts brought out in this book become more generally known, these generous Christians will decide to devote their money to other missions rather than spend it in the Jewish missionary field where the laborers are so deceitful and the harvest is so poor.

Never again, since the appearance of this book—the only book on the subject as far as I know—will the Jewish missionary be quite at ease when he goes up and down the land telling unblushingly marvelous tales of his own conversion and that of his “converts.” “My Return to Judaism” will return to plague him and perhaps even to make him quit his disgraceful business.

During my association with the Jewish missionaries, I would often think with horror of what would happen in case I died while being one of them. Crowned with all the Christian virtues imaginable, my glorified ghost would have been toted about to be exhibited along with other “converted rabbis” as a powerful illustration of the glorious missionary results.

Fortunate indeed is my lot that the fear of posthumous pro-missionary activity has been replaced by a lively hope that even after I am dead I shall continue through this book to be useful to the cause of Judaism, whose ideals of truth and justice are the hope of the world and will be the ultimate salvation of mankind.¹⁰²

Later in the book he reiterates these sentiments, adding that “the work of the Jewish missionaries, with its large financial backing and small regard for decency and truth, constitutes a menace to our Jewish youth.”¹⁰³ This statement may be somewhat overdramatized, but Freuder was of course right to emphasize that conversion had radical implications, involving Jews in a deep repudiation of their families and their whole social as well as spiritual identity. Obviously he was also trying to justify his own actions.

Freuder prayed that Judaism could find new life in the restored land of Israel. In this sentiment he was most probably influenced by Rabbi Stephen Wise, one of several influential Jews with whom he had become very friendly. Stephen Wise was no relation of Isaac Mayer Wise, although it is interesting to note that the former was the most

important American Reform rabbi of the nineteenth century, the latter was the most important Reform rabbi of the early twentieth century, and, despite his checkered career, Freuder was one of the few rabbis to be a disciple of both.¹⁰⁴

Freuder also had the friendship or support of many other prominent and influential Jews, largely regardless of denomination. For example, there is a letter from six prominent Jewish leaders, both Reform and Orthodox, asking Felix M. Warburg to join a book subscrip-



Dr. Stephen Wise
(*American Jewish Archives*)

tion for the first edition of Freuder's autobiography.¹⁰⁵ And a letter exists from Freuder himself to Louis Marshall; its immediate purpose is to ask for \$500 to underwrite the cost of printing a second edition, but it clearly implies that Marshall had read the first edition and had been sufficiently impressed to send Freuder money and a letter of support.¹⁰⁶ Freuder says, revealingly:

I have written the book because I felt that it would serve as a powerful weapon to counteract the pernicious activity of so-called "converted" Jews by showing their misguided supporters the futility of their misguided effort.... Only recently, as you are well aware, the Presbyterians appropriated a large fund for the conversion of the Jews. My book would surely act as an antidote to the contemplated poisoning of the minds of our Jewish youth.¹⁰⁷

His polemical purpose in writing his autobiography is made explicit here. Freuder had finally found a project that seemed to go with the goals of the Jewish communal leadership and this discovery made him almost euphoric. Thus we are reminded that his autobiography, although in one sense an attempt to state the truth about his life, was also an exercise in “self-fashioning.”¹⁰⁸

Freuder’s story is essentially a very sad one. His account is filled with remorse and sadness at his own decisions, but he carefully avoided blaming others. While he vigorously condemned the Jewish missionary societies, in most cases he spoke highly of churchmen and Christians generally. He refrained from attacking Jews or making them in any way responsible for his original defection. Similarly, in his discussion of the problems he encountered in switching from European Orthodoxy to Radical Reform, he attached no blame to Reform theology, practice, or institutions.

Freuder saw the act of converting to another religion as essentially destructive.¹⁰⁹ While he did not discuss the topic of conversion to Judaism, he advocated that people remain within their original religious group. Between his return to Judaism and his death he appears to have found some degree of spiritual peace. It was a long and circuitous route for a tortured soul.

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NOTES

1. Samuel Freuder, *My Return to Judaism*, 3d ed. (New York: Bloch, 1924), 195–96. (It was originally published under the title *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism*, in 1915, and a second edition appeared in 1922.)

2. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

3. In December 1861, Wise bought a large farm between North College Hill and

Mount Healthy, nine miles north of Cincinnati. See Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1992), 187.

4. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 33.
5. *Jewish Tidings* (Rochester, N.Y.), July 30, 1887, 1.
6. Personal correspondence with Rosalind Chaiken, March 17, 1998.
7. Kevin Proffitt, archivist of the American Jewish Archives, personal correspondence, April 16, 1998.
8. *Jewish Tidings*, July 30, 1887, 1.
9. *American Israelite*, October 22, 1891, 4.
10. *Die Deborah*, October 22, 1891, 4.
11. *Ibid.*
12. The *American Israelite* and *Die Deborah* were sold together, with *Die Deborah* regarded as a supplement.
13. This was Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer's seminary. See David Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990).
14. *American Israelite*, October 22, 1891, 3.
15. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 33.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Minutes for September 22, 1885, Hebrew Union College manuscript collection, 155–56, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (hereafter cited as AJA).
18. *Ibid.*, April 9, 1886.
19. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Jews in Minnesota: The First Seventy-Five Years* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1959), 187.
20. *Die Deborah*, October 22, 1891, 4.
21. W. Gunther Plaut, *Mount Zion, 1856–1956* (Saint Paul, Minn.: Mount Zion Hebrew Congregation, 1956), 59–60.
22. See Henry Schwartz, "The First Temple Beth Israel, San Diego," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1979): 153–61.
23. *San Diego Daily Bee*, September 16, 1888; *American Israelite*, November 23, 1888, 3. The *San Diego Union* also published articles on Freuder, June 1 and 8, 1888; *San Diego Sun* (weekly edition), January 10, 1889; *American Israelite*, December 14, 1888. Also see Ronald D. Gerson, "Jewish Religious Life in San Diego, California, 1851–1918" (master's thesis, HUC–JIR, 1974), 50–56.
24. *San Diego Daily Bee*, September 16, 1888.
25. *American Israelite*, December 14, 1888, 7.
26. Spiritualism seems to have appealed more to women than to men: see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). One Jewish woman who left Judaism for Spiritualism and then returned was Cora Wilburn of Boston, Massachusetts, and later Camden, Maine. A letter from Wilburn to Henrietta Szold dating from 1891 can be found in Alexandra Lee Levin, *The Szolds of Lombard Street: A Baltimore Family, 1859–1909* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), 259–60. I wish to thank Professor Jonathan Sarna for bringing this source to my attention. Wilburn published her poetry widely, first in Spiritualist publications and, after her return to Judaism, in American Jewish newspapers. She also published essays on Judaism in the Boston

Jewish press.

27. *San Diego Daily Bee*, September 16, 1888.

28. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 34–35.

29. *Ibid.*, 35.

30. In November 1877, Rabbi Samuel Weil, who had recently moved from Columbus, Ohio, to Denver, Colorado, wrote to a Reverend Bliss stating his belief in Jesus and his willingness to convert. In December 1877 he left Denver for the East Coast; it is unclear whether he officially became a Christian. See Marjorie Hornbein, *Temple Emanuel of Denver: A Centennial History* (Denver: Congregation Emmanuel, 1974).

31. Jacob Kabakoff, *The Pioneers of Hebrew Literature in America* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishers, 1966).

32. Henry Gersoni, "A Leaf from My Own History," *Jewish Advance*, January 2, 1880, 5, and subsequent weeks until April 16, 1880, 5.

33. Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Cleveland* (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), 147–48.

34. Isaac Leeser, "Mr. E. Marcussohn," *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 10, no. 7 (October 1852): 352–56; with response by Marcussohn, 356–60. (Marcussohn's name is spelled in a number of different ways, sometimes even in the same source.) For a modern perspective on temporary apostasy, see John Wilson and Darren E. Sherkat, "Returning to the Fold," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 2 (1994): 37.

35. Timothy P. Weber, one of the major contemporary scholars in the field, is author of *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); the quotation can be found on 150. On Jewish conversion to Christianity in modernity, see the collection of essays edited by Todd M. Endelman, *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1987).

36. David Max Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew* (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, 1978), 180.

37. On the college, see Samuel E. Karff, ed., *Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1976).

38. Professor Gary Zola, director of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, is doing research on Wertheimer. His findings should help to put Freuder's actions in a comparative perspective.

39. Max Eichhorn states that J. Hoffman Cohn told how Moses came to Leopold Cohn for financial help. Apparently Moses was desperate. Cohn was not completely certain of the year, other than that it was before 1910. According to Cohn, Moses needed money because "he had found no way to make a living . . . to provide for himself and his children, and my father, himself in the midst of a desperate struggle . . . could be of no help to him." When Moses failed to find help, he committed suicide. See Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*, 180, 199, and chap 11, n. 2.

40. *Jewish Comment* 9, no. 24 (March 29, 1901): 6.

41. These radicals included Solomon Sonneschein (see n. 43), Isaac Low Chronik, Solomon Schindler, and Charles Fleischer. Unlike Freuder, who converted to Christianity, Schindler and Fleischer left Judaism for a universalistic conception of religion. Schindler later returned to his original faith, just as Freuder did.

42. Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of*

Felix Adler (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979).

43. Solomon H. Sonneschein was the best known example. Sonneschein served as rabbi of Temple Shaare Emeth in Saint Louis, where he tried to break down particularistic barriers. For example, he urged Jews to celebrate Christmas with Christians and urged Christians to celebrate Hannukah with Jews. When requested, he even conducted church services for Unitarians as well as German Protestant groups. In 1886 he traveled from Saint Louis to Boston to interview for a Unitarian pulpit. He did not, however, become a Unitarian minister. See the (Saint Louis) *Jewish Free Press*, March–October 1886, particularly June 29 and July 9. On Sonneschein generally, see the Solomon Sonneschein and Bernhard Felsenthal files, AJA; Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*, vol. 3 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 79; Benny Kraut, “A Unitarian Rabbi? The Case of Solomon Sonneschein,” in Endelman, *Jewish Apostasy*, 272–308. Most recently, see the excellent account of Sonneschein’s Saint Louis career in Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis, 1807–1907*, vol. 1 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 219–20, 280–95.

44. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Growth of Reform Judaism: American and European Sources until 1948* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1965). My thanks to Robert Singerman for bringing this item to my attention.

45. All three men had difficulty adjusting to life in the United States. According to Deutsch’s account, Moses’ problems were at least partly a matter of prejudice: his Polish accent represented a significant handicap in a Reform movement still dominated by Central Europeans. But Freuder himself appears to have been a success in the pulpit. Despite running into difficulties when he tried to push ritual changes too quickly, he was clearly good at adjusting his expectations to those of his congregants.

46. See Yaakov S. Ariel, *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865–1945* (New York: Carlson, 1991).

47. By 1915, the “Conferences on Behalf of Israel” were drawing 17,000 spectators. See Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 142–43. For a view of how some of the Jewish communal organizations and individuals responded to the threat of Christian missionizing in one representative community, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Jewish Communal Divisiveness in Response to Christian Influences in the Lower East Side, 1900–1910,” in Endelman, *Jewish Apostasy*, 255–71.

48. On Christian thought in this period, see D. G. Hart, “The Critical Period for Protestant Thought in America,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38 (1987): 254–70. On American millennialism, see Nathan O. Hatch, “The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (1974): 407–30. On religion in late-nineteenth-century America, see Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 1, *The Irony of It All, 1893–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971); and Francis P. Weisenberger, *Ordeal of Faith: The Crisis of Churchgoing America, 1865–1900* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959). On the concept of the apocalypse see Arthur P. Mendel, *Vision and Violence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

49. Some millennialists believed that references to the millennium in both the Hebrew and the Christian Bibles were intended only figuratively: the millennial reign of Jesus Christ occurs in the hearts of believers and nowhere else. In contrast, both pre- and post-millennialists believe that Jesus would literally return to earth as the

Messiah. Post-millennialists believe he would return after the church has established the millennialist reign through its teaching of the Christian faith. See Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 9. On the millenarian movement today in America, see Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

50. One important topic that this article will not discuss is what impact the missions had on the Jewish community. For that, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Impact of Nineteenth Century Christian Missions on American Jews," in Endelman, *Jewish Apostasy*, 232–54, and idem, "The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth Century Christian Missions," *Journal of American History* 68 (1981): 35–51.

51. Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 130–31.

52. James Brookes, "How to Reach the Jews," *Truth* 9 (1893): 135–36, as quoted in Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 142.

53. Arno C. Gaebelin, *Our Hope* 20 (January 1914): 442–45, as quoted in Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 142. On the Jews in the United States in the nineteenth century, see Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), and Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*, vol. 2 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991). For the later nineteenth century, see Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), and Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry*, vol. 3 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993). The notorious Leopold Cohn was accused, without basis, as it turned out, of fleeing a murder accusation in Hungary. For Cohn's account, see D. Leopold Cohn, *A Modern Missionary to an Ancient People*, 2d ed. (New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1911).

54. David Max Eichhorn states that this baptism occurred on Yom Kippur (Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*, 180).

55. It would be difficult to imagine a large group of immigrant Jews attending a baptism at all, much less on Yom Kippur. One might have thought that Freuder was referring to personal friends, or to other Jews who already had a connection to Christianity, but he wrote that during the closing hymn most of the Jews observing left "with ill-suppressed disgust and anger" (Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 37–38).

56. *Ibid.*

57. This is a strange and fascinating comment. Here, apparently, the implication is that Freuder never really believed in Christianity at all and became a missionary precisely because this act would free him from the duty to perform a Christian minister's ordinary religious tasks. Why else "irksome and distasteful"? And yet this is bizarre, for it suggests that Freuder's apostasy was motivated not by religious convictions deep enough to overcome all the social and psychological obstacles in the Jewish apostate's way but rather by nothing more than a vague sense that religious fulfillment might be found elsewhere. There is one other possibility, of course: that here especially we see evidence of Freuder's deep need to fashion a myth about his past that fits his current convictions. He is writing long after his return to Judaism, and it is no surprise that he would like to deny ever *really* believing in Christianity. Hence he skews the account in such a way that personal or psychological problems (which were undoubtedly significant) become the sole cause of his straying. See *ibid.*, 50–51.

58. See Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 144.

59. The account originally appeared in the *Boston Globe*, June 4, 1908. I have taken

the quote from Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 8–15.

60. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 52.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Die Deborah*, October 22, 1891, 4.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Isaac M. Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans. and ed. David Philipson (Cincinnati: Leo Wise, 1901), 68.

65. *Jewish Messenger*, December 17, 1875, 4.

66. Meshumed: an apostate from Judaism; the term carries an extremely negative connotation.

67. Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 144–46.

68. Jonathan D. Sarna, "From Necessity to Virtue: The Hebrew-Christianity of Gideon R. Lederer," *Ilfiff Review* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 27–33. Lederer was editor of the missionary journal *Nathaniel: or The Israelite Indeed*, a magazine that attempted to encourage Jewish converts to Christianity. This is an excellent source of information on that subject. The term *Israelite Indeed* comes from John 1:47, where Jesus uses the term to refer to Nathaniel, an early convert from Judaism to Jewish Christianity. In addition, "The Israelite Indeed" was a play on the name of Isaac Mayer Wise's paper the *American Israelite*.

69. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 3:401.

70. Weber, *American Premillennialism*, 154.

71. Jonathan Sarna has raised the possibility that "perhaps the man was gay and that this underlay his frustration," adding that "such psychoanalyzing, of course, is sheer speculation in the absence of evidence" (personal correspondence with Jonathan Sarna, June 17, 1998). Yaakov Ariel tends toward a more prosaic explanation: "Was S. Freuder gay? It's very popular today to declare persons gay posthumously. But do we have a proof? And is it relevant? From my experience in life, people who stand between two cultures often don't marry... and on the other hand, gay men or women in a traditional environment do marry" (personal correspondence with Yaakov Ariel, August 12, 1998). Both commentators are clearly right to see Freuder's sexual orientation as a factor that might have explanatory value if we had the relevant evidence, and they are right to accept that we simply do not have that evidence. This doesn't mean we should leap to other conclusions about Freuder's buried personal motivations; rather, it is a salutary reminder of the extent to which the geography of his inner life must remain terra incognita.

72. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 196–97.

73. The Rev. Dr. H. Pereira Mendes, rabbi of Shearith Israel Synagogue of New York City. Shearith Israel was an Orthodox Sephardic congregation. See David De Sola Pool and Tamar De Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654–1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).

74. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 56.

75. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

76. *Ibid.*, 11.

77. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

78. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

79. In a footnote he added: "My doubts on this point have been happily removed."

80. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 12–13.

81. *Ibid.*, 14.

82. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

83. *Ibid.*, 9.

84. *Ibid.*, 197–200.

85. *Ibid.* The list of committee members shows that Freuder had clearly gained the hearts—and pocketbooks—of a diverse and very influential group of Jewish leaders, including Stephen Wise, who wrote the introduction to the third edition and was one of the most important Jewish leaders in America; David De Sola Pool, an extremely well-respected Sephardic Orthodox rabbi; and Mordecai Kaplan, who would become the founder of the Reconstructionist movement. The full list is as follows: Hyman I. Barnett, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Joseph Barondess, New York; Julius Bashlow, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Moses H. Bresler, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Dr. Samuel Buchler, New York; Jacob De Haas, New York; Joseph Durst, Yonkers, N.Y.; Jacob Fabian, Paterson, N.J.; Benjamin Fain, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Jacob Ferber, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; A. Gewirtz, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Max Goldstein, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Morris W. Haft, New York; Max Jonas, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Rabbi M. M. Kaplan, New York; Rabbi Nathan Krass, New York; Rabbi Isaac Landman, Far Rockaway, N.Y.; Charles Lefkowitz, Newark, N.J.; Rabbi Elias Margolis, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Rabbi David De Sola Pool, New York; Rabbi Max Raisin, Paterson, N.J.; Bernard Reich, New York; Cantor Josef Rosenblatt, New York; Abner B. Rosenfield, Far Rockaway, N.Y.; David Sardut, Brooklyn, N.Y.; A. Schneider, New York; Bernard Semel, New York; Morris Sendar, New York; Rabbi Elias L. Solomon, New York; Benjamin Titman, New York; Edward C. Weinrib, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, New York; H. I. Zimmerman, Mount Vernon, N.Y.; Joseph Zuckerman, Mount Vernon, N.Y.

86. *American Israelite*, August 13, 1914, 7. This appears to be an extension of the almost identical comment printed in the *American Hebrew*, August 7, 1914, 389.

87. *American Hebrew*, April 30, 1915, 740.

88. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 186

89. *Ibid.*, 187–90

90. Isaac S. Moses was a leading Reform rabbi and it is fascinating to see so clearly, though without any further information, that his wife did not believe in or practice Reform Judaism. This situation does not seem to have affected his public pronouncements or positions—but further research in this area might be of considerable value.

91. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 192–94.

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*, 190–91.

94. *Ibid.*, 192.

95. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zavah, folio 11.

96. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, 203–4.

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*, 12.

100. *Ibid.*, 204–6. The reference to Rabbi Akiva is to be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachoth, folio 61.

101. For a contemporary Jewish perspective similar to that of Freuder's, see Lewis A. Hart, *A Jewish Reply to Christian Evangelists* (New York: Bloch, 1907).

102. Freuder, *Return to Judaism*, preface to the third edition, no page numbers list-

ed.

103. Ibid. (second edition), 207.

104. If there is any correspondence extant between Stephen Wise and Freuder, I have been unable to find it. Abby Lester of the American Jewish Historical Society has searched the Stephen Wise papers under five major sections (Requests for Aid; Publications—books; Arts and Letters—books; Individual Correspondence List; and Correspondence with Publishers). The result: "None of these sections contains correspondence from or about Samuel Freuder" (personal correspondence, January 19, 1999).

105. The letter is dated August 8, 1913, and signed by the following: Gotthard Deutsch, professor of Jewish history at Hebrew Union College; Rabbi Max Heller, Temple Sinai, New Orleans; Rabbi Martin Meyer, Temple Emanuel, San Francisco; Rabbi Joseph Stolz, Isaiah Temple, Chicago; Rabbi H. Pereira Mendes, minister to the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, New York City; Albert Lucas, secretary of the Union of Orthodox Congregations of America. The first four were all Reform figures, and the latter two were Orthodox. Among the Reformers, furthermore, both Zionists (Heller) and non-Zionists (Meyer) were represented. See the Felix M. Warburg Papers, box 164, AJA. The working title of Freuder's book at that time, as mentioned in the letter, was *Back to Judaism*.

106. December 21, 1920. See the Louis Marshall Collection, box 55, AJA. For correspondence between Freuder and Warburg, see the Felix M. Warburg Papers, box 164, AJA. My thanks to Robert Singerman for bringing these items to my attention and to Kevin Proffitt for providing me with copies of them.

107. Freuder to Marshall, Louis Marshall Collection, box 55, AJA.

108. For more on this issue see, for example, Paul John Eakin, ed., *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Herbert Leibowitz, ed., *Fabricating Lives: Explorations in American Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters, eds., *Autobiography and Post-Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994). For a fascinating study of an issue much more specific to Kohler's case, see Peter A. Dorsey, *Sacred Estrangement: The Rhetoric of Conversion in Modern American Autobiography* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). See also Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), ix. Adams writes that "autobiography is the story of an attempt to reconcile one's life with one's self, and is not, therefore, meant to be taken as historically accurate but as metaphorically authentic." On the use of the term *self-fashioning* in modern Jewish studies, see Idana Goldberg, "Gender, Jews, and the 1876 Centennial Exhibition: Self-Fashioning and the Diaries of Fannie and Amelia Allen," paper presented at the Third Scholars' Conference on American Jewish History, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1998.

109. Early in the nineteenth century Jane Picken of Philadelphia had converted from Christianity to Judaism and back, and she expressed a similarly deep regret for how conflicting religious loyalty could cause deep emotional harm to all concerned. Picken's husband was a practicing Orthodox rabbi in Richmond, Virginia. The couple divorced as a result of her return to Christianity. See her autobiography, written under her married name, S. J. Cohen, *Henry Luria, or The Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen* (New York: John R. Trow, 1860). Like Freuder's, this book was very much an exercise in "self-fashioning."