

Conversion to Judaism

A Historical Perspective

DANA EVAN KAPLAN

MANY RECENT OBSERVERS HAVE EXPRESSED PESSIMISM about the uniquely Judaic religious and ethnic identity of the Jewish people in America. According to Alan Dershowitz, “[t]he good news is that American Jews—as individuals—have never been more secure, more accepted, more affluent, and less victimized by discrimination or antisemitism. The bad news is that American Jews—as a people—have never been in greater danger of disappearing through assimilation, intermarriage, and low birthrates.”¹ Similarly, Nathan Glazer has complained that “[l]ess and less of the life of American Jews is derived from Jewish history, experience, culture, and religion. More and more of it is derived from the current and existing realities of American culture, American politics and the general American religion.”² Perhaps most pessimistic of all, the sociologist Samuel C. Heilman writes that not only are American Jews as a whole having great difficulty maintaining their identity and passing that identity on from generation to generation, but even Orthodox Jews—the subject of much of his research—are also feeling a great deal of pressure in maintaining their institutions and preventing the attrition of their youth: “And when these most involved and active of Jews are in trouble, what optimism can there be about all those who are less involved and whose Judaism is less intensive, whose commitments may crumble under the weight of economic realities or erode under the tide of assimilation?”³

The opposite phenomenon is also well noted, however. A small number of Americans not born or raised as Jews choose to convert to Judaism. These “Jews by Choice” bring new hope—along with their numbers—to Jews despairing of a Jewish future in the United States.

Over the past two decades, a number of prominent American Jewish leaders and writers have suggested that an enthusiastic approach to conversion to Judaism could benefit both the Jews as a people, as well as Judaism as a religion. Gary Tobin, director of the Institute for Community and Religion in San Francisco, as well as the Abramson program in Jewish policy research at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, presented this argument at an invitation-only conference held at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City in April.⁴ At about the same time, Tobin’s new book, *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion Can Revitalize the Jewish Community*, was published by Jossey-Bass of San Francisco.⁵ Here Tobin argues that the Jewish community is ready to engage in an organized proselytizing

DANA EVAN KAPLAN is a research fellow at the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and associate rabbi at Congregation Emanu-El B’ne Jeshurun. He is editing a book on Contemporary Debates in Reform Judaism, and is completing a manuscript on the Jews of South Africa during the Mandela years. His article “Judaism and the Jewish Community in the New South Africa” appeared in the Summer 1996 issue.

campaign that could bring in millions of new Jews, who would come from all sorts of religious and ethnic backgrounds. He argues that over the next several decades, the American Jewish community could utilize proselytizing to increase their numbers substantially, and that that increase in numbers could also mean a regeneration of interest in all aspects of Judaism. He, like many other American Jewish policy-makers, is deeply concerned with the potential loss of a substantial segment of the Jewish community in the coming years due to assimilation, and argues that American Jews should “Open the gates to all those who might choose to become Jews. Opening the gates reverses the Jewish community’s current response to the reality of American pluralism. It means abandoning a paradigm that our children and grandchildren are potential Gentiles, and promoting the new belief that America is filled with potential Jews. Opening the gates means embracing *proactive conversion*, which is the open, positive, accessible, and joyful process of encouraging non-Jews to become Jews.”⁶

Tobin appears to be indirectly influenced by the research of Rodney Stark, who has argued that “typically people do not *seek* a faith; they *encounter* one through their ties to other people who already accept this faith. In the end, accepting a new religion is part of conforming to the expectation and example of one’s family and friends.”⁷ Stark had argued that religious movements can grow when their members continue to form new relationships with outsiders. Otherwise the adherents of a religion are limited to proselytizing among those they already know well, which is a relatively small pool that has already been tapped. Tobin suggests that in the case of Judaism this is not the case, since American Jews have been very hesitant to ask even their relatives by marriage to consider conversion to Judaism, let alone their friends and neighbors. Tobin believes that many of these non-Jews are potentially looking for a religious faith and could be encouraged to consider Judaism as a viable option.

Tobin is not in favor of using active proselytizing as an excuse to eliminate the boundaries of religious identity. Therefore, he stresses that a formal, ritual conversion is, in his view, essential before one can become a Jew. While many potential Jews will start to practice Judaism before they begin to convert formally, and certainly during the time period in which they are in the process of converting, the practice of specific Judaic ritual acts and the emotion that one feels him or herself to be a Jew does not make one a Jew. A formal conversion is absolutely essential.

And why have American Jews been so hesitant to seek proselytes? Tobin believes that many American Jews remain afraid of the outsider. He argues that there has been a powerful duality of fear that has dominated the Jewish psyche for generations. “On the one hand, we are afraid that our differences from others engender hostility and persecution. On the other hand, we are also afraid that we are losing the distinctiveness that separates us from others. We are afraid of the stranger, and afraid of becoming the stranger.”⁸

He suggests that this fear has led to a stress in the American Jewish community on prevention of intermarriage, rather than outreach. But prevention of intermarriage cannot even under the best of circumstances lead to population growth and Jewish cultural vitality. “Growth is essential and does not come from prevention tactics. Growth comes from encouraging growth. . . . The focus on preventing intermarriage saps our creative energy and resources from imagining what Judaism can be, and from developing new social, cultural, and religious

structures and processes to make it happen. Prevention does just that: it *prevents* us from creating a better Jewish community. It is nonsense to say that the Jewish community is doing just fine. It is just as nonsensical to believe that the problem is intermarriage.”⁹

Tobin’s presentation of arguments for conversion, in the context of a plan for a campaign for proactive conversion to Judaism, frames the issue anew. He suggests that the Jewish community can open many gates, which can include Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. He proposes educational models that have already been developed to serve as prototypes for a national proselytizing campaign.¹⁰ Tobin outlines a plan for changing the ideology that has prevented American Jews from accepting proselytizing as a real possibility. He believes that it will take five to ten years for such ideas to “work their way into the system,” and “for the proactive conversion agenda to take form.”¹¹ New institutions must be created and a major financial investment must be made. There needs to be an in-service program for re-training rabbis who are already serving in congregations and in other settings, and there needs to be a program created to build a core of lay advocates for Judaism. New rituals for the celebration of conversion must be created “to bring conversion out of the closet and make it a ceremony that rivals the bar or bat mitzvah as an entry point in Jewish life.”¹² New conversion processes must be created, including programs that run over very different time spans and that are divided into different stages that can be completed as an individual feels comfortable with that particular stage. New multi-media material needs to be created, including programs that are suitable not only for radio and TV, but also the Internet and any other new media that may come along. New institutions for conversion need to be created, including a national center for Jewish inclusion.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Jossey-Bass, the publisher of Tobin’s *Opening the Gates*, has also published a fascinating book by Richard Cimino and Don Lattin on American religion in the new millennium. Journalists who have covered contemporary religion for the last two decades, Cimino and Lattin note that in the post-denominational age, evangelism is not just for evangelicals. They explain that it is not a secret why evangelical churches are growing fast and mainline Protestant denominations are not. The evangelicals try harder. While they admit that there are certainly numerous other factors ranging from demographics to economics, they see one of the central reasons that “they are out there actively seeking members. To use the metaphor of the religious marketplace, they advertise.”¹³

Cimino and Lattin clearly point to the various trends that they believe will determine the direction and shape of religion in America in the twenty-first century. They argue that all congregations in the new millennium will be shaped by certain social forces, including consumerism, decentralization, and pluralism. “To grow or merely to survive, they must consider the mood of spiritual shoppers in the religious marketplace.”¹⁴ Cimino and Lattin explain that they are not suggesting that American denominations need to adopt a bland uniformity, what might be called a “franchise mentality.” Rather, the American religious free market encourages diversity and has room for denominations that do have strong beliefs and colorful traditions. “The marketplace in the long run favors congregations that have a strong identity.” But these denominations have to get out among the people and actively recruit. They argue that in the new millennium many successful churches will take a market-based approach to search for new members, as well as

to keep the ones that they already have. There will be an increasing stress on an individualized approach to religion as Americans look for religious inspiration from personal spiritual experiences. As Robert Bellah has put it, "Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. 'Being good' becomes 'feeling good'"¹⁵ But at some point they will search for community and will seek to integrate their "pick and choose" approach to faith into a formalized structure. Cimino and Lattin argue that the American religious future is based largely on local congregations which cater to people who have "fragmented spiritualities." These congregations will tap into the "religious market" and will cater to the consumerism of the American religious client. While they admit that many may find this vision rather unpleasant "barring social or natural catastrophes, few alternatives appear on the horizon."¹⁶

These are the premises on which Tobin bases his argument, noting that American Jews are a community in transition. This transition is inevitable in pluralistic America as Jews become fully integrated into the society – something that they have long sought after. "The integration we sought to achieve and have been so diligent in pursuing seems like a curse to the beneficiaries of freedom and success. The fear of extinction could be a self-fulfilling prophecy for non-Orthodox Judaism."¹⁷ Tobin argues that "We are lost and confused. We do not know what to do next."¹⁸

But if Jews in America continue to do nothing other than to cry about intermarriage, they will miss creating a religious community that can successfully compete for new members with the other American religions and denominations. There is a tremendous opportunity in the American society of the twenty-first century, but it requires creativity as well as organization. Obsessing about the security of the past and the loss of that sense in the present, can hardly put the Jewish community in the most advantageous light. "Some Jews create a nostalgic memory of Jews all marrying each other, being Torah scholars, and eating Bubbie's home-baked Challah. If we can only recapture our unity, our uniqueness, our oneness. Better to think small."¹⁹ Tobin comments that there are even some American Jews who feel more comfortable in the presence of a degree of antisemitism because it is more familiar to them "than thinking about what Judaism could and should be."²⁰ When Tobin suggests that American Jews have a monumental set of tasks that are daunting in their magnitude, what he is referring to is that Jews need to refashion Judaism to compete in the marketplace of religions in twenty-first century America.

The question of the place of conversion in the American Jewish agenda will not go away. Given this fact, it is worth tracing its history back before the 1960s, when the intermarriage rate began shooting up. How did American Judaism arrive at the debate that is now going on concerning the proper role of proselytizing in our religion and our community?²¹

The most common motivation for conversion has always been romantic, not spiritual. A Jew falls in love with a Christian, but they or their families are very concerned with the possible loss of Jewish identity, which is a feared long-term consequence of the marriage. The non-Jewish partner then may express a willingness to become a Jew and the conversion process is begun. Particularly if the Gentile partner is the woman—which was (and is still) usually the case—a formal conversion might be regarded as crucial for ensuring that the children will have a religious identity as Jews. Some non-Jews with loose (or no) ties to organized Christianity might feel that becoming a Jew would unify the religious identity of the

family. This would allow the couple to share a common religion and hence a common community, a factor that was far more important in the past than it has become in the “post-ethnic” 1990s. Another factor traditionally has been a wish on the part of the future daughter-in-law to please her future in-laws. Conversion before marriage would allow for an official Jewish wedding.

In the recent past there were also communal reasons for the non-Jew to consider conversion to Judaism. In nineteenth-century America the American Jewish community was frequently seen as a step-up socially and even more so economically. Stereotypes of Jews as hard-working, sober, and monogamous contrasted for many gentile women with what they heard about many of the men from their own ethnic groups. Prospective proselytes often had many Jewish friends and had had a long history of exposure to Jewish ways, sometimes even before meeting their intended spouses.²² Religious motivation can also be a deciding factor. It may seem odd to put this category last, but the reality is that the vast majority have converted as a direct result of romantic involvement.²³ Nevertheless, some nineteenth-century Americans did choose Judaism as a religious belief system without any corresponding love relationship. While the numbers were small, they had an impact out of proportion to those numbers. Warder Cresson,²⁴ the Philadelphia Quaker, is the best known nineteenth-century ideological convert, but there were numerous others who made important contributions to their local communities and American Judaism as a whole. Those ideologically motivated individuals perceived Judaism as the most satisfying religion available to them.

The Early American Experience

In America the Jewish community of the colonial period was heavily influenced by the British Sephardic social and communal structure. Up until at least 1820, American Jewish congregational life attempted to recreate the British Jewish community, in which many American Jews had grown up, or lived for an intervening period as part of their eventual emigration from Europe to the New World. British Jews took the view that, after the expulsion of 1290, their readmission to England in 1656 depended on a tacit agreement not to convert Christians to Judaism.²⁵ In any case, they sought to live peacefully in England and realized that allowing conversion could only hurt their social and economic position. There were a few converts, but most persistent potential proselytes were sent to the Netherlands to undergo the actual conversion ceremony—and many others were rejected outright.²⁶

The earliest Jewish immigrants to North America had mostly been Sephardim, and their American synagogues followed the same policy of restricting conversions, but the leaders of the synagogues found it difficult to enforce total compliance. Some converts who married into prominent Jewish families were able to pressure the congregation into allowing conversion. Others were sent to the Netherlands, France, or elsewhere in Europe.

From about 1700 onward Ashkenazim started to arrive in America at a much higher rate than before. Congregations that were officially Sephardic had as their members substantial numbers of *Tedescos*, Jews of Ashkenazic origins from Poland or other Eastern European countries. Most Ashkenazim emigrated from continental Europe to England, where they frequently worked for trading organizations before continuing on to North America. Because there were no established Ashkenazic synagogues, these Ashkenazim joined the socially prestigious Sephardic

congregations, even though most aristocratic Sephardic members did not usually mix socially with their Ashkenazic co-religionists outside of the synagogue.²⁷

Other Jewish immigrants were native British Jews, and understanding their connection to England is critical to understanding the early phase of American Jewish policy toward conversion to Judaism and proselytizing. When the Ashkenazim from Great Britain arrived in America, their previous involvement in British Jewish communal life made their integration into the Sephardic Jewish community much easier despite the fact that they were not Sephardim. They were used to a British Sephardic-style synagogue. In addition, their involvement in international trade, which was similar to the activities of American Sephardim, also strengthened their sense of common values and lifestyle. The Jewish communal perspective, including the restriction of conversion to Judaism, united them further with a religious perspective similar to that of the American Sephardim.

British Jews were familiar with the 1698 law “for the most effectual suppression of blasphemy and profaneness.” This law made it a crime to deny the truth of Christianity and was seen as the official reason for the Jewish community to refuse converts to Judaism. The anti-conversion attitude lasted in Great Britain at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century, but after this a large number of conversions took place.²⁸ The change of attitude may have had an effect in America, but the primary forces of change in the New World had little to do with the mother country. It may also be that even after attitudes toward conversion to Judaism began to soften in the Sephardic community of London, the American Sephardic community held firmly to what they remembered from their earlier years in England, despite the fact that close contact was maintained between the two countries.²⁹

In general, American Jewish religious practice changed very little throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries.³⁰ When religious problems arose, synagogue boards needing guidance would occasionally write to the *beit din* of London or Amsterdam for a *teshuvah*, a rabbinic response to a halakhic question. They would state the facts of the case and request a definitive legal ruling. Of course the appeal to religious authorities in Europe was not solely a Jewish activity; various American Christian churches also consulted with their ecclesiastic centers in Europe.

Not all such *shéelot* [legal queries] received in Europe were answered. Many may have been lost, forgotten by the messenger, or misdirected. Furthermore, it could take up to a year for the *teshuvah* to get back to the American community that had sent the *shéela* and, even for decisions not requiring an immediate answer, such a long time was often impractical. The Jewish community sometimes ran out of patience and made its own decision. The situation was further complicated by the social reality of America, which made certain views preferable. Over the course of time, most American Jews instinctively chose positions compatible with an American ethos, making many European halakhic rulings at best irrelevant, and at worst, divisive.

In contrast to the practice of writing a *shéela* to a European *beit din*, the synagogue board often simply voted. This was the case in 1793 in Savannah, Georgia, where the circumcised son of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother died. The parents wanted the son buried in the synagogue’s cemetery, and the board met and voted on the issue. In the end the board denied permission for the burial. But there is no indication that the decision to vote (as opposed to sending a *shéela*) was

itself based on close readings of rabbinic texts, or other religious factors. More likely it was a personal and/or political decision.³¹

Jacob Rader Marcus has remarked that there were certainly many potential proselytes who did not even attempt to convert because of the Jewish communities' stated positions on conversion. Evidence of this can be found on the official level in synagogue constitutions and other official pronouncements. Documents from the Lyons Collection indicate the following synagogue rule in the historical sketch of Shearith Israel synagogue³² of New York: "As early as the year 5523–1763 a law was passed prohibiting any of the officers of the congregation aiding or assisting in making proselytes, or performing the marriage ceremony of any Jew, to a proselyte, and which is at present the law of the congregation under the penalty of one hundred dollars."³³

This pronouncement was actually used as a precedent for refusing to allow gentiles to convert, or converts to marry, under the auspices of the synagogue. For example, in 1787 the Minute Book of Shearith Israel recorded the following: "On the 10th Day of Tebet 5544 [January 4, 1787]: At a meeting of the *Parnass* and assistants, a petition was presented by Mr. Benjamin I. Jacobs to admit his being married to a woman not belonging to our society, with intent to make her a proselyte, which petition is refused in consequence of a law to the contrary dated the 6th of Nissan 5523 [March 20, 1763]."³⁴

This was typical of the board pronouncements and actual policy of the established Sephardic synagogues of the late eighteenth century. While some Jewish men—perhaps the vast majority during the eighteenth century—allowed their Christian wives to raise Christian families, others were interested in bringing their wives and children into the synagogues with them. The hostile reception these families sometimes received from synagogue boards may have deterred many. Some nevertheless insisted on raising Jewish families, with or without formal conversion or official sanction.

Many women who never formally converted raised their children to be Jewish and may have regarded themselves as Jewish even without a formal ceremony. There was a large gap between the formal synagogue board-approved conception of Jewish identity and the perception of ordinary Jews and proselytes. Couples who did not aspire to socialize in certain upper-class affluent Jewish circles may or may not have regarded the act of formal conversion as a social barrier. Most, certainly, were not troubled by possible halakhic difficulties.

Many of the females who were potential proselytes wanted to convert to Judaism because they were about to marry a Jewish man. Others wanted to convert because they had already married a Jew and had been turned away before marriage. Now married and perhaps with small children, their chances of acceptance were slightly greater. For example, Anna Barnett most likely married Nathan Barnett around 1790 without formally converting and had three children with him. After being widowed young, she remarried in 1818 to David Benjamin Nones, son of the revolutionary patriot Benjamin Nones. Before doing so, she attempted to convert, along with her three children; because David's father was prominent in Mikveh Israel Congregation of Philadelphia, she was apparently allowed to do so.³⁵

Conversion and marriage did not always guarantee burial in a Jewish cemetery. Esther Whitlock Mordechai Cohen was a convert who married Moses Mordechai in 1760 or 1761 and then Jacob Cohen in 1782.³⁶ She was denied burial

in the Richmond Jewish cemetery.³⁷ Jacob Cohen outlived his wife, and it is revealing that even a highly respected man could not use his influence to get his wife buried in the Jewish cemetery. Other proselytes were more fortunate: Barbara Nathans, the first wife of Isaiah Nathans, of Philadelphia, was given the name Sarah upon conversion and was accepted for burial in the Spruce Street Burying Ground of Mikveh Israel Congregation.

While there may have been pressure on synagogue boards to take the realities of marriage into consideration, there was even greater pressure on the Jewish men involved to present their wives and their marriages in a way designed to emphasize their commitment to Judaism. A letter from the files of Shearith Israel in New York deals with a case of a Jewish man, Benjamin Jacobs, about to marry a non-Jewish woman:

Gentlemen, and petitioner hereof Benjamin Jacobs, Being upon the point of marriage and the Lady, whom he is about to espouse, Being desirous to live as a Jewess: Joins with him in this petition, and Begs that she may be married according to the manners and customs of the Jews, as it is her desire, to live in the strict observance of all our laws and customs, which if granted, will greatly oblige, but her and the bearer, who waits at Mr. Cohens to answer any questions which the gentlemen may think fit to ask him.³⁸

Here, as probably in other cases, the husband put forward his wife's case, so the degree of the wife's commitment can only be conjectured. The board refused Jacobs's request on the grounds that the synagogue had a constitutional clause from 1763 prohibiting conversions. Evidently this clause corresponded to their own view that conversion to Judaism should not be encouraged, for it appears they invoked it regardless of how observant a potential convert might be.³⁹

Gerald Sorin has presented a sober picture of American Jewish life in the early nineteenth century, pointing out that intermarriage was frequent and synagogue attendance low. His discussion of the Newport congregation, which had virtually ceased to exist by 1900, is indicative, and he points out that "Only one new synagogue had been built in the United States—in Richmond, Virginia—in the fifty years since the Revolution. And when the leader of New York's Shearith Israel Synagogue died in 1816 after 48 years of service, he was replaced by a merchant who filled in part time."⁴⁰ Even Sorin, however, accepts that: "[T]he push toward assimilation was persistently counteracted by the many substantial advantages of Jewish community and its meaningful belief system as well as the 'comforting psychological haven' of Jewish identification. And in the first decades of the 19th century, though Jewish Americans felt some tension between ethnic group loyalty and the preservation of distinctiveness, on the one hand, and identification with American society and assimilation, on the other, they appear to have been relatively confident about the future."⁴¹

Sorin estimates that the rate of Jewish intermarriage with non-Jewish Americans was above 20 percent nationwide,⁴² but jumped to about 50 percent for "wide open boom towns" such as New Orleans. It should be noted, however, that New Orleans was an unusual case. San Francisco, for example, could be regarded as another "wide open boom town," which did not share many of the lowered social barriers that New Orleans experienced, and certainly not to the same degree. In any case, however: ". . . synagogue leaders

were convinced that intermarriage threatened the very existence of the American Jewish world. Their worry was not without a rational foundation, for when Jews married gentiles, very few lived as Jews. The overwhelming majority—indeed, nearly 90 percent of those who married outside the faith—appear to have assimilated entirely within the Christian population.”⁴³

Since most nineteenth-century conversions to Judaism in America were motivated by marital intentions, the sociological element is central.⁴⁴ Most converts were not seeking spiritual transcendence, but rather affiliation with the Jewish community. The most important influence was clearly the spouse or prospective spouse, as well as his (or her) family.⁴⁵ In the nineteenth century, conversions by women far outweighed those by men. Women who converted to Judaism and then married into the Jewish community were being brought into a specific role, that of Jewish wife and mother. Beyond the rabbi, and sometimes members of the Jewish community, the Jewish family often helped with the transition and informal instruction of the woman into the cultural elements in Jewish life.⁴⁶

American Sephardic congregations had to fight a tough battle to maintain their traditional way of life.⁴⁷ One factor that led to diminishing success was the aristocratic exclusivism of the Sephardim. Many in the Sephardic community viewed themselves as part of an elite socioeconomic group defined by religio-ethnic affiliation and were unwilling to consider new models for inculcating religious commitment. Among other reasons, they viewed their British Sephardic religious identity as a unique characteristic.⁴⁸ The Sephardic upper class looked down particularly on the German Jewish immigrants who began arriving in the 1830s. Most viewed their Sephardic aristocratic heritage as a bloodline and therefore refused to countenance non-Jews, or even Ashkenazim, entering their elite circle.

Already in the 1820s it had become difficult for synagogue elders in urban centers in the United States to enforce communal discipline on religious matters. The increasing size, as well as the pluralistic nature of the Jewish community, made it impossible to control every religious act. In particular, individuals requiring a religious functionary to perform certain life cycle events, such as weddings, funerals, and circumcisions, often looked outside the community of the synagogue. There were a number of men with enough traditional Hebrew training, as well as the appropriate demeanor to present themselves as suitable for this position. They neither claimed to hold a valid rabbinic title—such a degree was not necessary in America in the 1820s since no Jewish religious leader had a legitimate rabbinic ordination—nor did they claim to represent or serve a congregation. Instead, they simply offered to perform a wide variety of religious rites.

In the first half of the century, German Jewish immigration created a larger, more diverse community. New congregations were established, and many religious functionaries began offering private religious services. It became possible to approach any number of individuals with a request for a conversion. Policies on conversion varied from congregation to congregation. Some accepted converts—particularly the non-Jewish wives of prominent members—and later adopted more restrictive policies. Other congregations decided each case individually.

Mid-Century: A Time of Rapid Change

The period from 1820 onward, especially from 1836 until just after the Civil War, was one of rapidly changing attitudes toward Judaism. As scholars have recently

demonstrated, most German Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States from Orthodox village backgrounds. Over the next 30 or 40 years, immigrants and their children began gradually to accommodate their traditional religious practice to suit their newly adopted environment. They slowly introduced small, practical reforms, such as introducing prayers in English into the service, moving toward mixed seating, and pushing for decorum—modeled after the Protestant paradigm—during synagogue worship.

Hasia Diner contrasts traditional Jewish attitudes with the mentality of nineteenth-century America:

The transplantation of Judaism to America seemed unpropitious and inorganic. Judaism drew no boundaries between the personal and the communal, yet an industrializing 19th-century America increasingly marked a sharp line between home and work, self and society, private and public. Traditional Jewish life centered on a highly structured, empowered community that enforced private behavior and insisted that in matters of piety individuals had little choice. America, on the other hand, had evolved into a society that assumed that matters of faith ultimately rested with the individual and concerned no one else.⁴⁹

This sense of religious autonomy was to effect a dramatic transformation of Judaism in America. Leon Jick expresses surprise that the Jews in America were able to avoid schism: “The 1830s and ‘40s in America were decades of accelerating religious fragmentation. Cleavages between the frontier country and areas of older settlement, between new immigrants and acculturated natives, between Southern Proslavery elements and Northern Antislavery advocates, between theological traditionalists and liberals racked every denomination. . . . What is remarkable about the Jews is that despite their lack of coordination and centralized direction, they maintained continuity and avoided major schisms or massive defections.”⁵⁰

Before 1820, intermarriage had often been perceived as a final break with Judaism. But intermarriage itself did much to relax these attitudes. Many congregations welcomed converts, and some accepted intermarried couples as part of their communities.

In the 1830s, when transportation from Europe became relatively safe, Jewish men and women began arriving in much greater numbers. Soon there was no longer a shortage of Jewish women, one decisive factor that earlier had promoted intermarriage. The profile of American Judaism was, however, rapidly changing. Population changes created social and even intellectual upheaval, and the American Jewish community underwent a process of transformation that might be seen as completed around 1880.⁵¹ As Nathan Glazer has described it: “In 1825 there were only about half a dozen active congregations in the United States; by 1848 there were about fifty, largely German Ashkenazim. These congregations introduced into American Jewish life what was almost the first tremor of intellectual conflict and dissension it had ever known. The placid Orthodoxy of the old settlers was swamped by a variety of conflicting forms of Judaism struggling with each other for the domination of the American Jewish Community.”⁵²

The increase in number and variety of synagogues in the United States affected Jewish communal policy on Judaism. Although the official attitude of the established

Sephardic communities toward conversion to Judaism was clear—for the most part highly unsympathetic—there was increasing pressure to change. New attitudes toward conversion to Judaism, influenced by the influx of German Jewish immigrants, were solely to gain acceptance from the 1820s onward, despite the reluctance of traditional Sephardic leaders, such as Shearith Israel, to relinquish control or relax their attitude on the issue. In New York, for example, such prominent congregations as B'nai Jeshurun, Anshe Chesed, and Shaarei Zedek were established. The New York Jewish community split into numerous congregations, and the mere increase in the number of synagogues allowed for more varied practice.

While more and more congregations accepted the idea of conversion for marriage, in general, many of those who opposed conversion in current practice based their opposition on the unsupervised use of freelance functionaries. In the 1830s and 1840s conversions came under close scrutiny—only converts who had been given proper rabbinical instruction were readily accepted into the congregations. The stage was now set for recognized religious leaders to begin converting non-Jews.

Perhaps in response to the changing standards, Anshe Chesed instituted a prohibition against conversion in 1837.⁵¹ In contrast, Shaarei Zedek agreed to the conversion of several women who had already married Jewish men. In April 1841 the congregation announced: "To all such whom it may concern who are members of this congregation and are married to wimen [sic] who are *shelo beygur* that between *Pesah* and *Shabuot* facility will be given by the trustees . . . to effect the same to wit: to enter such women and their children *kadat* unto the congregation of the Lord and that if any such who shall not enter and take advantage of such facility shall be excluded from this congregation and all such who plead that their wives have already been entered *kadat* to produce such certificates of the same or stand excluded from this congregation."⁵⁴

Most of the other New York congregations protested. B'nai Jeshurun's membership passed a resolution to investigate the practice of admitting converts without proper rabbinical sanction. Faced with this communal pressure, the board of Shaarei Zedek decided to back down. Having already converted the wives of some members, the congregation now adopted a resolution prohibiting conversion.⁵⁵

The debate as to what constituted proper instruction for the conversion process was persistent and vigorous throughout this period. The emergence of such newspapers as *The Jew*, *The Israelite*, and *The Occident* added a new dimension.⁵⁶ *The Jew* was the first American Jewish newspaper and is an important original source for understanding Jewish attitudes regarding conversion to Judaism in the 1820s. For the first time matters that previously had involved only members of the various synagogue boards were now opened to discussion through the press, and the general Jewish population was made aware of views and options that were not necessarily the same as those of the established traditional Sephardic leadership. The press played a large role as a liberalizing influence during this transitional period. In addition, issues that were discussed in the American Jewish newspapers were also reported on in the European Jewish press, and so matters of concern in America gained international coverage through such newspapers as the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (Germany) and *Die Neuzeit* (Austria).⁵⁷

It is critical to understand that American Jews were building their institutions at a time of immense social and religious upheaval. In such an environment of radical change—indeed of splintering and fragmentation—it was truly remarkable that the

various Jewish communities avoided any divisive schisms. The antebellum period was a time of tremendous religious activity generally. As Steven Mintz writes:

During the decades before the Civil War, America was a veritable “spiritual hothouse,” a place of extraordinary religious ferment and enthusiasm. Many new religions and sects arose—among them, the Disciples of Christ, the Mormons, and the Shakers. An influx of foreign immigrants helped create ethnic and linguistic fissures in older churches, such as the Lutheran church and the Roman Catholic Church. Older denominations splintered and fragmented, producing diverse forms of Presbyterianism (Old School, New School, Reformed, Associated) and many kinds of Baptist churches (General, Free Will, Regular, Separate). Lay members challenged established authority and demanded changes in ritual. In many churches, women suddenly assumed previously unheard-of roles.⁵⁸

Jews in the United States went through the same kind of changes. It was during this period that a unified form of Judaism based on the Sephardic Minhag and Orthodox beliefs and practices split into factions, represented by (for example) traditionalists such as Isaac Leeser, moderate reformers such as Isaac Mayer Wise, radical reformers such as David Einhorn, and traditionalist reformers such as Benjamin Szold.

Jewish religious leaders found themselves partially in and partially out of the competitive religious economy of Antebellum society. As an ethnic group, Jews were likely to stay connected to the community whether or not they found Judaism to be the most spiritual religion in America. Some would drift away from the Jewish community rather than move directly from Judaism to Christianity. But the Jewish community could build policies that would attract outsiders—non-Jews—more or less by making Judaism more or less accessible and presenting it as an open versus a closed society. Of course much of this perception would be based on how the non-Jew viewed the actual attitudes of the average Jewish people in the community rather than what its leaders said, but the leaders could set the tone and model the perspective of individuals.

The Philadelphia Conference can be seen as a turning point in terms of the rabbinic leadership of what was to become the Reform Movement. The Philadelphia Conference was dominated by the ideas—and the direction—of David Einhorn, the leader of East Coast Radical Reform. Isaac Mayer Wise had always tried to keep all elements within a unified consensus position. When that became impossible, he tried to cater to the broadest possible constituency. The domination of this conference by the radical Reform element can be seen as the beginning of the Classical Reform Era.

The Classical Reform Period (1869–1881)

Between 1869 and 1881, when mass immigration began, Reform Judaism became increasingly important as the most acculturated form of Jewish religion in the United States.⁵⁹ Both moderate and radical Reformers performed conversions, and both factions viewed Judaism as a religion, not as a nationality. Their similarities in regard to conversion, however, ended there. Radical reformers, including David Einhorn and Samuel Hirsch, viewed Judaism as a theological system with a particular mission.

Those who understood the theological task and were committed to helping fulfill it were welcome, but those who did not were excluded. The moderate Reformers, such as Isaac Mayer Wise and Isadore Kalisch, had a more practical view and were willing to convert a much wider spectrum of people, including those who desired to convert in order to marry a Jew, but who may not have possessed the intellectual or spiritual commitment demanded by radicals such as Einhorn.

Classical Reform Judaism promoted a universalistic conception of Judaism, maintaining that non-Jews could and should embrace the theology and perhaps even the customs of American Reform Judaism. Already at the Philadelphia Conference of 1869, and certainly at the Pittsburgh Conference of 1885, attempts were made to present Judaism as a universalistic religion consistent with the current ideas on evolution, biblical scholarship, and the concept of progress—one that could fulfill the spiritual needs of all people not just the relatively few who were born Jewish. A few Reform leaders, including Solomon Schindler, Charles Fleischer, and Felix Adler, moved away from a particularistic Judaism entirely, believing that Judaism would become the one truly universalistic religion of humanity, at least in America. In their view Judaism was the truest form of ethical monotheism, toward which all of humanity should strive, and therefore Judaism should try to cast its universal religious message as widely as possible.⁶⁰

There was a great deal of discussion in the late nineteenth century on the nature of race and many Jewish thinkers debated the question of whether the Jews were a race. There were obvious implications for the question of spreading Judaism to Gentiles, because if the Jews were a race, then how would it be possible for a Gentile to become a Jew? That was part of the reason that many radical and even classical reformers attempted to repudiate the idea of the Jews as a race. For example, Rabbi Samuel Sale of St. Louis wrote in Emil Hirsch's *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."⁶¹ Adolph Moses of Louisville even suggested that the term *Judaism* should be changed to *Yahvism*.⁶²

The concept of the *mission of Israel* was central to the position on proselytes. A theological formulation used by nineteenth-century Jewish Reform theorists to both justify the unique role Judaism could and should play in modern society, while at the same time placing emphasis on the distinctiveness of Jewish religious life, the *mission of Israel* was an authorization for conversion. Rabbi Emil Hirsch, son of Rabbi Samuel Hirsch and a radical Reform rabbi himself who studied in Berlin and Leipzig, wrote on why this mission does not require the Jews to segregate themselves: "This mission does not imply distinctness from others in dress, in custom, in diet, in habit, in language, this mission does not involve the segregation of Jews into a ghetto of their own making. We must so live that indeed through us God's name be sanctified and the families of the earth be blessed through our influence for the good, noble and true."⁶³

Hirsch then related his views on the *mission of Israel* to the charge that Judaism has a socially exclusive attitude toward outsiders. According to Hirsch, "We are not more exclusive than nature is, than history always is. We open the door to whomsoever may wish to have part and share in our mission. But we will not, the most radical of radicals will not, in order to win the world—destroy Judaism."

Having made it clear that universalistic tendencies should not lead to the elimination of Judaism, Hirsch openly encouraged those from outside to come in: "Let those that are no longer Christians—those that are no longer in sympathy with dogmatic religion, join our ranks! They will find a warm welcome in this house."⁶⁴

Admittedly, Hirsch's conception of the *mission of Israel* was among the more radical, even for Reformers. He believed that the ultimate purpose of Judaism is to promote the coming of an era of universality. All humankind will be united under one religion whose cornerstones will be justice, truth, and peace. Creeds and forms will no longer divide mankind, and Judaism will relinquish its unique identity because its mission will have been fulfilled. According to Hirsch, American Judaism welcomes proselytes:

Today our congregation does not require Jewish birth as a condition for joining it. Our doors are open. Whoever wishes to come is welcome. It is only our foolish fiscal policy which you men of financial ability seem to hold necessary that it stands in the way of making this congregation universal in this city at least, and therefore a shining example to all the other congregations of earnest purpose of this land. With that stumbling block removed, which is also a stumbling block against the admission of your own sons and daughters—we may indeed carry out the prophetic ideal of a religion which is all embracing.⁶⁵

Despite this theological and philosophical acceptance of proselytes, on the few occasions when potential proselytes approached Reform rabbis for conversion without a Jewish partner, the response was usually far from enthusiastic. In practice most Reform rabbis did not put great energy into proselytizing among America's non-Jews. While in principle many accepted the desirability of receiving converts and rejected the traditional view that proselytes should be discouraged, they understood that their congregations were not universalistic centers of ethical monotheism, but instead sometimes cliquish groups of German Jews who isolated themselves socially, not only from most non-Jews, but even from their Eastern European co-religionists. Preaching universalism on paper, in their rabbinic practice rabbis dealt with the specific needs of a clearly defined socioeconomic ethnic subgroup.

Mass Emigration Begins

In 1881, following the great wave of pogroms in Russia, a huge number of Eastern European Orthodox Jews emigrated to America; in the course of a few short years this caused a radical change in the composition and dynamics of American Jewry. In 1880, there were not quite eight million Jews in the world, of whom six million lived in Eastern Europe and only about a quarter million, or 3%, lived in the United States. By 1920, however, this figure had risen to the astonishing 23%.⁶⁶

This mass immigration entirely transformed the scale, and also the linguistic and ethnic complexion of American Jewry. Even more significant, however, was the extent to which it transformed the sociology of the interaction between American Jews and the rest of the nation. Because they tended to settle in urban communities that were ethnically and socially segregated from non-Jews, the new groups did not need to develop thoroughgoing religious policies on conversion. Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Russia, for example, were typical in having little in common with—

and little contact with—non-Jews, such as Irish immigrants. Inter-marriage and conversion were simply not issues in the same way—or not for several generations.

This is one reason why the controversy over conversion increasingly focused specifically on *milat gerim*, the circumcision of converts—and why, in any case, it seemed to have less and less significance. While various views were brought forth by both radical and moderate Reformers, the leaders of the Orthodox Eastern European immigrants were not interested in the debate and the issue seemed irrelevant to their concerns. By the end of the century, the ideological controversy surrounding conversion was no longer a source of great contention or heated debate. Even Orthodox conversions were reported in the Yiddish press as curiosities more than as items of ideological controversy.

It is interesting to reflect that only in the last generation, as the grandchildren of the 1880s immigrants have grown up, has conversion once again become a hotly debated issue.

The Current Situation

Gary Tobin's proactive conversion proposal is therefore not entirely a new idea. Indeed, Alexander Schindler's famous speech of December 2, 1978⁶⁷ did not come out of a vacuum. It makes a lot of sense in today's America to consider the communal benefits that can come from dramatically increasing the number of converts to Judaism. Jews in the Second Temple and Rabbinic periods proselytized,⁶⁸ and therefore, so the argument goes, there is no reason that Jews today should feel restricted by inhibitions developed during the centuries of Christian persecution. American Jews have become a successful and self-confident American ethnic and religious group, and many people are desirous of joining such a distinguished American tribe.

And yet, the fact that so many Jews seem so apathetic to Judaism is a factor that cannot be ignored. Bernard Lazerwitz and Ephraim Tabory have drawn on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) to show that only 9% of Reform Jews and 20% of Conservative Jews say they go to synagogue 13 times or more per year. In contrast to this, 52% of Fundamentalist Christians attend church 13 times or more per year, and 51% of Catholics do. Even if we look at liberal Protestants whom we would assume would be very similar to Jews, we find that 29% attend church 13 times or more per year, which is still substantially more than even Conservative Jews.⁶⁹ Many rabbis report that attendance at synagogues is far lower than even the statistics indicate. Although there are certainly pockets of Jewish religious vibrancy, it is difficult to describe the American Jewish community as deeply devoted to religious faith and practice.

Even the proposals to proselytize seem to focus primarily on the practical. Jacob Neusner argues that in his view, Tobin's view of Judaism: "Is fundamentally secular in most of its particulars, and where religion figures, it is instrumental."⁷⁰ This is not necessarily Tobin's fault—he is trying to formulate a practical response that will work in the American Jewish community. And the American Jewish community is a very secularized community that holds onto a vague notion of ethnicity, but lacks religious commitment. The question is, can one attract large numbers of proselytes to a religion that is majestic on paper, but that is believed in and practiced with love and fervor by the 6-10% who are Orthodox, and another relatively small percentage who are non-Orthodox but still enthusiastic.

Because of this central weakness, the proselytism campaign may find it very difficult to attract large numbers of “unchurched Gentiles.” There is no precedent for such a mass campaign in American Jewish history, and it is not at all clear that the American Jewish community is oriented toward this approach. Even if the numbers of conversions to Judaism are only a fraction of what Tobin hopes, the impact on American Judaism will be enormous. The relationship between American Jews and the State of Israel will be dramatically affected. The future course of Jewish history will likewise move in new and unforeseen directions. And the pessimists may yet live to see their prophecies proven false.



Conversion and the American Jewish Agenda

EPHRAIM BUCHWALD

I'D LIKE TO STATE CLEARLY AT THE OUTSET, THAT I AM NOT opposed to conversion or to converts. To the contrary, the National Jewish outreach program, which I direct, has offered thousands of converts, potential converts, and intermarried couples classes in Hebrew reading and Basic Judaism.

I'm delighted to have been invited to the “Conference on Proactive Conversion: Opening The Gates for Non-Jews to Become Jews.” Even more flattering than the invitation to this august forum, is the deep honor paid me by being quoted on the very first page of Gary Tobin's challenging new volume, *Opening The Gates*. Dr. Tobin cites me in the context of the hysteria that has gripped the Jewish community concerning Jews marrying non-Jews. He quotes me as saying, “There are no barking dogs, no Zyklon-B gas . . . but make no mistake: This is a spiritual Holocaust.”

First of all, for the record, that statement was said about general assimilation, not intermarriage. Besides, I am not so hysterical about Jews marrying non-Jews, whether it's 52% or 42%. (By the way, had a zoo keeper been losing 40% of his sea lions, he would be hysterical too!) I'm much more agitated that I have not been able to mobilize or even sensitize the American Jewish leadership to do what needs to be done—to nurture the next generation of Jews in America. I'm far more exercised that we're spending billions of dollars on Holocaust memorials, rather than investing our resources in joyous, Jewish outreach for our young people. I'm worked up because there are millions of American Jews who desperately want to be a part of the Jewish community and they have nowhere to turn. We have failed them.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the reality: Our children are drowning. If I may continue the metaphor, while our children are drowning, the non-churched gentiles of America are floating on an air mattress in the water. It's true, they're not swimming with God. But they're not drowning. Gary Tobin suggests that we throw the life preserver to the gentiles. Have we lost our minds?!!

EPHRAIM Z. BUCHWALD is founder and director of the National Jewish Outreach Program and rabbi of the Beginner's Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York City.