

"CONVERTS"

A two-page feature article headed "THE CONVERTS" (Byline: Nesya Shafran) was published in the weekend supplement of the Hebrew daily "HA'ARETZ" (25.6.82), excerpts of which follow:

QUESTION: What do the son of "Rabeinu Gershom, the Light of the Exile," Herzl's son, the composers Gustav Mahler and Felix Mendelsohn, Lydia Montefiore (Moshe M.'s aunt) and the poet-singer Bob Dillon all have in common? ANSWER: They're all converts.

There have always been Jews who have changed their religion; in "good" periods few became Christians, in hard times--multitudes. The attempts to convert Jews to Christianity by "godness" did not meet with any great successes notwithstanding the huge resources invested (and being invested) by various missionary societies. The exodus from the Ghetto...brought more Jews into the Church than all the continuous missionary efforts, not because enlightened Jews...were suddenly taken by the Christian faith, but because most of the important positions in society were closed to Jews. In England many Sephardi Jews converted--Benjamin D'Israeli is the most well-known; in Germany the great flow into Christianity began in the days of Mendelsohn--before 1914 there were 100,000; in all of Europe at least twice that many. The poet-convert Heinrich Heine commented: "The baptismal certificate serves as the passport into European civilization..."

All this is past history. At present Jews are not converting solely for the purpose of gaining access to high office, and all the more is this true when the Nazi racial doctrines proved that conversion is no guarantee of security (for Jews). In most of the countries where Jews now live it isn't necessary to become Christian in order to advance professionally and economically. Even if someone desires to assimilate into Christian society, there is no need to take this final step of conversion. Today it is possible to sever ties with Judaism in other ways, sometimes even in one generation, and certainly in two or three, especially in the U.S.A. Nevertheless, even in the U.S.A. there are conversions; not many, but there are.

Two important reasons lead American Jews today to change their religion: (1) Marriage to a Christian mate; (2) Theological motives. In these two instances we have "converts of convenience"; that is, Jews who have become Christian for personal reasons, yet who maintain a positive attitude toward their ancestral religion. "Converts of spite" (those who have become alienated from their ancestral religion and work against it) are rare, although many accuse the sect "JEWS FOR JESUS" of being such converts; but we shall return to them later.

Converts have always aroused fierce emotions among Jews: Revulsion, recoil, fear, contempt, mystery. And if it occurs in a family (and it has happened in some of the best Jewish families) the mourning rites are observed. When the son of Rabeinu Gershom converted, his father mourned for him until his last day on earth. Jews who have departed from tradition also do not accept conversion in their family lightly. Yet there does remain an element of curiosity. What leads Jews today to convert? The answers are as numerous as the converts. Besides those Jews who have converted for matrimonial reasons (an estimated 3% of inter-married couples), it is doubtful whether one can find a single common factor.

Kent Rockford is a professor of Greek and Latin and a convert, born to a New York Jewish family in 1933. His great-great grandfather was a rabbi in Germany, his grandfather belonged to a Reformed Synagogue in the U.S.A.; he himself learned he was Jewish only when he was age 10, at which time his parents told him; and the main message was that "there are clubs and hotels which we cannot enter." He grew up in a wealthy household surrounded by governesses and servants from whom he absorbed his initial information about Christianity. The family's Judaism found expression in wedding and burial ceremonies. At 15, when a Catholic friend took him to church, the young man was deeply impressed by what he saw, and was ready to convert at once, but his father was very ill and he was anxious not to cause him sorrow. When his father died, his mother asked him to wait four more years to be sure that he really wanted to convert, and at 19 he was baptized.

"I have by nature a religious soul, and I was attracted to the piety found in the Catholic Church," he states. He had no theological problems in accepting Jesus, he says, because from his early youth he was far more exposed to Christianity than to Judaism. The fact that the Catholic Church persecuted Jews and burnt them on the stake...troubled him; and before his conversion, he did discuss this with a

converted (Jewish) priest, and until now he hasn't found a satisfactory solution, but he lives with the dilemma because what the Church offers him outweighs this consideration. "One thing grieves me," he says; "I abandoned a religion that I never had a chance to know. I would feel much better if I had grown up in a traditional Jewish home and then had made the choice. I feel that I missed out on a very rich world; but today there is no way back...."

Joe Graden is a member of the Quaker sect, age 36, a famous personality in the USA, a pharmacologist by profession, with regular feature column appearing in 150 newspapers and two books published which have sold 1½ million copies. Joe's family was not assimilated, his parents having a clear Jewish identity with an East European secular-Socialist background. (If he had been born in Israel, he would probably have been educated in the left-wing "Shomer Ha'Tsair".) He was much influenced by the social ideals he absorbed in his parents' home, and was involved in campus radical movements in the 1960s.

Graden was attracted to the Quakers from the age of 10 when he accompanied two neighbourhood girls to a Quaker meeting, and found the Quaker religion easy to accept. While the Quakers are indeed Christians, Jesus doesn't play a central role in their faith. "No, I don't believe in Jesus," says Joe, "although there are others who do. This is an elitist religion which attracts intellectuals. It's easier for Jews to get into Quakerism than other Christian sects, and they don't have a history of anti-Jewish persecution. I know other Jewish Quakers, and what enchants me about the Quakers is their involvement in social causes. My Jewish relatives don't approve of my joining the Quakers, but I can't say that I -especially like my relatives; they're racists, materialists, without ideals or faith." Although he sees himself as Jewish and would like his children to have some attachment to Judaism, he admits that the chances are slim.

It appears that many converts continue to view themselves as Jewish. Some are so sensitive to this point that any inference to the contrary infuriates them. When I tried to meet a young professor of Comparative Religion in order to speak with him about his conversion, he shouted into the telephone: "I'm Jewish! I was raised in an Orthodox home and had a Bar-Mitzva. I also observe the Jewish holidays and I'm a Unitarian minister. So what? There's no contradiction. I'm a good and proper Jew, and I will not speak with someone who expresses doubts about my Jewishness."

Another Jewish woman, a convert, married for 30 years to a Catholic lawyer, said: "There's no point in relating my story. Jews in any case don't understand it. There's no way to explain to a Jew in a balanced and objective manner why another Jew decided of his own free will to become a Christian."

The story of "JEWS FOR JESUS" is another matter. In the long run this is much more dangerous, and it isn't surprising that many Jews have rallied to combat the phenomenon. The concept of "Messianic Jews" ("Yehudim Meshihiim" in HEBREW) began in the 1970s (after the various causes of the 1960s lost their momentum, and it was the turn of the religious sects). While other sects appealed to the wider public, the "Messianic Jews" invested most of their energies in young Jews; and the most prominent among these groups was the sect "JEWS FOR JESUS", founded by Moishe Rosen, a Jew who had become a Baptist clergyman. The "JEWS FOR JESUS" claim that there is no need to leave Judaism in order to accept Jesus as Messiah; on the contrary, belief in Jesus makes them even better Jews. They meet in "synagogues" and use distinctively Jewish symbols (the traditional prayer shawl, phylacteries, the Holy Ark, skullcaps, Star of David chains, the "mezuzah" on the doorpost); and one of their favourite slogans is "JESUS, YES; CHRISTIANITY, NO!" They celebrate Jewish holidays, learn Hebrew and Jewish history, and enthusiastically support the State of Israel and the campaigns for Soviet Jewry. Besides all these, they are baptized, believe in Jesus, sing passages from the New Testament which have been adapted to traditional Jewish melodies.

The non-Jews among them also get Jewish training in history, customs and traditional foods, in order that they may have good ties with Jews. The Christians attracted to the sect are seeking the Jewish sources of Christianity in their belief that in this way they are drawing closer to authentic Christianity. Their methods of operation are completely modern: Newspaper ads, TV commercials and special radio broadcasts... In the last decade several of the sect leaders have published books describing their personal "redemption," as well as various manuals. The most effective operation,

(MORE)

however, is personal contact in the streets, in high schools and universities, in special cafés, and the like. The "JEWS FOR JESUS" sect is the largest among the "Messianic Jewish" sects, and the number of adherents is estimated at approximately 10,000.

In the Christian Church itself there is a certain vagueness in the attitude towards them. There are those who claim that it is impossible to be a Christian and a Jew at one and the same time, and that the "Messianic Jews" do harm to both religions. Others claim that missionizing is of the essence of Christianity, and should they avoid such activity among Jews, it would be discriminatory against the Jews... My own attempts to meet with "JEWS FOR JESUS" leaders were fruitless. "Jewish and Israeli journalists are prejudiced against us and we're not interested in a negative press," was always the response.

Of course the American-Jewish community views them negatively. There are those who view them as official missionaries, different from the traditional missionaries only in their tactics, and here is the important question: Is this ordinary missionary activity, highly sophisticated, whose aim is to convert Jews to Christianity, and in the final analysis bring them into established Christendom? Or is this an authentic movement which is meeting a real need of Jews and providing a solution to a new situation?

For the Jewish Establishment it is convenient to believe that this is ordinary missionizing. Judaism has had a lengthy historical experience with Christian missionaries, and this experience has demonstrated that missionary success was always limited in its scope. Jews never converted in multitudes of their own free will except in times of persecution, distress and discrimination. Of course one must wage total war against the "JEWS FOR JESUS" since the Jewish people cannot permit itself at present to lose even one Jew, but one should not see them as a real threat.

It isn't clear, however, whether this is a correct reading of the situation since it may well be that the rise of "JEWS FOR JESUS" is an expression of the genuine spiritual distress of Jewish young people. The Jewish life of American Jewry has become extremely shallow, the religious aspect is marginal, and the Jewishness of many Jews is focussed on social activities, fund-raising and actions on behalf of Israel and Soviet Jewry. With all due respect to the importance of these, it remains that for young people seeking an identity, and an aim and faith in life, these things are inadequate.

Even if the fate of the "JEWS FOR JESUS" sect cannot be forecast, it would be well to remember that they have considerable potential. Jewish children growing up in secular homes, having no contact with the Synagogue and the Jewish community, quite often know more about Christianity than about Judaism for the simple reason that Christianity is the majority religion and they are heavily exposed to it. Even more complicated is the situation for those growing up in a home where only one parent is Jewish...and many of the children search for a religious commitment. In the coming century there will be a huge number of young people who will not belong to any clearly defined religious camp...

In brief, even if "JEWS FOR JESUS" at present is only a small sect, they do have a potential for success, and it may be realized under the right conditions, which only the future can tell. It is for this reason that Jews are following the "JEWS FOR JESUS" sect with special concern. They are apprehensive that here is not any ordinary missionary movement, (which is also not to be belittled, of course) but an authentic Jewish movement which has come to meet a particular growing need. In either case, American Jewry has no solution to the problem, except for general remarks about increased Jewish education, opening cafés for Jewish youth in response to the "JEWS FOR JESUS" coffee-houses, or opening other Jewish centres to which distressed youth can turn.

In summary, this is a process of Jewish existence in the Diaspora of "natural selection." If in previous generations the pogroms, the Inquisition, and religious discrimination led to apostacy, in coming generations it may well be that equality and integration into Christian society may lead to the same result. (END)

(MORE)

CHRISTIANS & JEWS

NEW TESTAMENTS: A Christian nurse employed by Hadassah Hospital (Mt. Scopus) was called in for questioning by the Head Nurse and censured for distributing copies of the New Testament to hospitalized soldiers. In a phone conversation with "HA'ARETZ" reporter Lilli Galilee, the nurse stated that she had not known that this was forbidden. It appears from the investigation of the Head Nurse that only a few copies of the New Testament were distributed "for the sake of peace." Nevertheless, in view of the hospital's policy of not permitting distribution of any religious material except at the express request of the patients, the nurse was asked not to do so again.

("HA'ARETZ": 21.6.82)

CHURCH VISITS: Regular visits by groups of State high school students to the Lutheran Church in Jaffa have stirred up a storm among Jews witness to them. It is reported that Orthodox Jewish employees of public institutions in the area are witnesses to the visits and tours of State high schools from various places around the country at the Christian church in Jaffa, and they have expressed their astonishment that school principals for some reason could find no other place to take the children except to the Lutheran Church. Yesterday a tour was arranged for high school students from Rishon Le'Zion. ("HA'MODIYA": 23.6.82)

CHRISTIANS & ANTISEMITISM: A report in the JERUSALEM POST (11.6.82) on "Antisemitism Today" includes the observation that "churches are today speaking out against anti-semitism, not necessarily out of love for Jews but because they see it as a reflection of individual and social problems. This was noted in a lecture by Professor Uriel Tal of Tel-Aviv University. "Evangelical Christians are staunch supporters of Israel," (he also noted), but their reasons, connected with the hope of the Second Coming, raise questions about future relations between Jews and Christians, Tal said. On the other hand, the anti-democratic or anti-pluralistic attitudes of some born-again Christians arouses concern...

INTERFAITH: "DAVAR", HA'ARETZ" & THE POST (22.6.82) report on the establishment of an interfaith committee for aid to Lebanese victims of the war. The committee includes representatives from all of Jerusalem's churches and is under Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kolliek's patronage.

CHRISTIANS PRO-ISRAEL: (LEBANON) A letter by Spokesman Jan W. Vanderhoeven of the Christian Embassy in Jerusalem appeared in the JERUSALEM POST (9.6.82) protesting a "double standard" in relating to Israel's campaign in Lebanon as compared to the attitudes towards Britain's operation in the Falklands. The Hebrew daily DAVAR (10.6) reported that George Otis, the radio director of "VOICE OF HOPE" in South Lebanon, immediately returned to Israel on arrival in New York from Tel-Aviv upon learning of the outbreak of hostilities, and then returned to America in order to raise funds to cover war damage. He also met with P.M. Menahem Begin ("NEWSVIEW" photo story: 15.6) and "shared with the P.M. a biblical quote from the Prophet Isaiah, which both find applicable to current events." An additional five newspaper clippings reported the arrival of Christian Evangelical pilgrims and media personnel to demonstrate solidarity with Israel, one of the groups being led by Rev. Milton Sutton of Houston, Texas, with other groups expected later. Sutton related the war to biblical prophecy, specifically the books of Isaiah and Obadiah (POST:18.6) The Christian news-media group of 40 was organized by the Christian Embassy and included visitors from 11 countries and five TV crews. (POST: 28.6) "Beth Shalom", the Christian society which is "anti-missionary and pro-Israel" (DAVAR" & "HA'ARETZ": 29.6) contributed medical equipment valued at \$100,000 in response to an appeal by the Prime Minister's wife Aliza Begin. Funds for maintaining a chair in social research at Bar-Ilan University were recently donated by an American doctor and her church, "HA'TSOFEH" reported. (24.6.82)

RESIDENT CHRISTIANS IN THE NEWS

BAPTIST VILLAGE: A friendly report on "an intriguing example of Christian life in Israel" appeared in the "INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS" (Denver, Colo.: 2.4.82), authored by Jennie Goldman of Jerusalem, and giving its history and various enterprises, its present concentration on conferences and camps, ministry to Lebanese, musical performances and fruit-picking.

NES AMIM: Reports on the dedication of the new guest-house. (SEE ALSO SELECTIONS 102 page 4) (MORE)

BEERSHEVA CHRISTIAN CEMETERY: A report in the "MAARIV" Negev supplement (27.5.82) exposes the neglect of the Christian cemetery in Beersheva because of the bureaucratic tangle resulting from the involvement of different denominations: first, Protestant missionaries, then local Roman Catholics, and finally the Greek Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, "Christians are buried under the rubbish," while officials of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and local planners cannot renovate the area until the inter-church issue is resolved. "The Ministry of Religious Affairs does not interfere in the affairs of the Christian communities, a policy which the churches themselves demand...it can only appeal to them to act," the reporter notes.

CLERICAL VOLUNTEER: Three brief news items reported a Jerusalem clergyman, Warren Graham's volunteer work as an ambulance driver with the Red Star of David following the outbreak of hostilities in June. ("MAARIV," 10.6; "LETZTE NAYIS": 11.6; "YEDIOT AKHRONOT": 13.6)

GERMAN AWARD TO CHRISTIAN SOCIAL WORKER: Elisheva Hemker, a German social worker living in Israel for 20 years, was awarded a prestigious decoration from the West German Government for her social work in Israel, and especially for establishing a unique nursing home in Nahariya which ministers to Christians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust years and then brought them or came with them to Israel. Miss Hemker originally visited Israel to do research on the families of mixed marriages and then became involved in community work among these families. She also located and provided aid to isolated Christian widows of Jewish husbands, and as a result embarked upon her project with the aid of the German government and of German Catholic bishops. She felt that "these wonderful...heroic women" who had rescued Jewish children and adults were in need "in their twilight years of a nursing home with a Christian atmosphere." ("YEDIOT AKHRONOT": 8.6.82)

BIBLICAL REFERENCES

ALEPPO CODEX+ A missing page from the Aleppo Codex, the oldest known manuscript of the entire (Old Testament) Bible has recently been discovered and identified by the Hebrew University National Library. An excerpt from II Chronicles, it is one of 200 out of the original 800 lost pages in 1948 as a result of anti-Jewish disturbances in Syria. (JERUSALEM POST: 16.3.82)

U.S.-HOLY LAND CONNECTION: A set of 70 volumes relating to the American-Holy Land connection during the 19th and early 20th centuries has been assembled by Arno Press of New York. The project was initiated in 1975 by Professor Moshe Davis of the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry. To date over \$100,000 worth of the series has been sold at \$1647 per complete set. It includes works by missionaries, Christian explorers and political writers. (JERUSALEM POST: 14.3.82)

HOLY LAND EXPLORERS: A survey of books and "travelogues" recently translated into Hebrew from the pen of 19th century explorers and commentators on the Lands of the Bible. ("HAARETZ": 12.3.82)

NEW BIBLE TRANSLATION: A feature article by Judy Siegel of the JERUSALEM POST (18.5.82) deals with the completion of the translation of the "k'tuvim" (Hagiographa) of the Hebrew Bible into modern English under the auspices of the Jewish Publication Society.

"PARADISE LOST": A review of the new translation into modern Hebrew of John Milton's classic "PARADISE LOST" appeared in "HAARETZ" (16.4.82). Translated by Reuven Avinoam, the work was published by Massada and Am Hasefer. The reviewer makes a brief comparison with the 19th century fragmentary translation by the Hebrew-Christian Salkinson, which was "imprecise...but preserved more of the (biblical) sublimity" of Milton's original than the present "more precise and somewhat secular version." He finds it noteworthy that "this is the first complete Hebrew translation of this classic creation, among the greatest works in world literature."

(MORE)

PENTECOST: A feature article by "OIKOUMENIKOS/CHRISTIAN COMMENT" in the JERUSALEM POST (27.5.82) describes the Christian festival of Pentecost, its biblical derivations and the "outpouring of the Spirit" as manifested today among various denominations in relation to the "spiritual renewal" (or charismatic) movement, and especially the impact on Israeli Christians. Renewal groups cross denominational lines and exist in Haifa, Nazareth, Tiberias, Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem.

BABYLON: In a review of the "Great Whore of Babylon", an extremely controversial play by a maverick Israeli playwright, the review notes the source of the biblical allusion in the title, taken from St. John's Apocalypse, and quotes verbatim Revelation 17:2-5. ("...with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication....") ("KAML HA'IR": 16.4.82)

SUNDRIES

A) "PEACE COMMUNE": "In the commune of Moshe Balat in Boston fourteen adults and four children live, some of them Jewish and some of them Christian, but they all observe the Sabbath, rise early, do yoga and meditation and seek their place in the world as human beings." Moshe is a doctor of psychotherapy, age 40, a former lecturer at Harvard University. He has a home in Jerusalem's Yemin Moshe Quarter, which he visits briefly from time to time, and he dreams of setting up a mental health commune in Israel. "Peace will come to the people of Israel only when they have truly created a Holy Land here; holiness and healing are one with me," he told an interviewer. ("MAARIV": 14.6.82)

B) CLERGY AT VERSAILLES: French President Francois Mitterand appointed a priest, a Protestant minister and a rabbi to organize prayers for all the heads of the states attending the summit meeting this week in Versailles. The Christian clergy were well-occupied but the rabbi was "unemployed" since none of the heads of state were Jewish. ("YEDIOT AKHRONOT": 10.6.82)

C) MUSIC: A review of organs, organists and organ music--mainly in Jerusalem's churches and centres--was published in the JERUSALEM POST (9.4.82). The music critic of the "POST" referred to the growing popularity of organ music among Christians and Jews and he encouraged Israeli composers to write for organ, which "could be performed, if not in a concert hall (for lack of organs) then in some of the churches in Jerusalem."

END TRANSCRIPTION/30.6.82/mb

* "JEWS FOR JESUS": (TRANSLATOR'S COMMENT): In case the context does not make it clear in the article "THE CONVERTS" (pages 1 to 3 herein), it should be noted that the term "JEWS FOR JESUS" in the Hebrew press (and in some of the non-Hebrew Jewish press) does not refer exclusively to the evangelistic organization by that name, but to the wider Hebrew-Christian movement, especially its more recent "Messianic Jewish" phase.