

## Returning to the Fold: Converts Who Returned to their Original Faith

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### Introduction

We are an interdisciplinary group today, so I want to say a brief word about my method. I'm a historian, and my discipline is at its best when telling stories. So I'm going to tell you two stories. One is about a woman; the other about a man. Both are about a person who converted from one religion to another, then returned to their original faith. At the end I'll make a few observations about why I think these stories matter.

### Sarah Jane Picken Cohen

Sarah Jane Picken Cohen spent half her life as a Jew, and half her life as a Christian. Her name tells the story of her two conversions.

Jane Picken was born in New York to a Scottish Presbyterian father and a mother in the Church of England. Orphaned as a child, Jane spent her youth under the tutelage of a "confirmed Deist," who parodied Methodist hymns and "utterly rejected revealed religion," so that Picken grew up knowing little of the Christianity of her parents. In 1806, Picken met Abraham Cohen, the "Jewish priest's son" at a party in Philadelphia. Cohen was the son of the *hazzan* (reader) of Congregation Mikveh Israel, a prominent Philadelphia synagogue. Picken was at first reluctant to court a Jew, but she was won over by a friend's advice that "Jew or Turk, it matters not, provided he loves you." For the orphaned and perhaps indigent woman, a potential marriage to Abraham Cohen could be seen as a step up in society, but Picken and Cohen also shared a deep affection for one another. Within three weeks they were engaged.<sup>1</sup>

A quick courtship did not make for a quick intermarriage. Abraham's father, Jacob Cohen, backed by the leadership of Mikveh Israel, would permit Abraham to marry only a Jew. Abraham

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<sup>1</sup>S. Jane Picken Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen* (New York: John F. Trow, 1860), 44-45, 49-52. There is a parallel to scenes in the Edith Wharton novel, *House of Mirth*, where an orphaned woman in society considers marrying a Jew as a step up the social ladder, though the episode in *House of Mirth* is notably antisemitic, and *Henry Luria* is not.

Cohen was called before the “elders of the church” and questioned by his father, who was old, sick, and “a perfect devotee to his religion, and looking forward to this his only son to represent him when he was no more.” Abraham was obligated to swear an oath “to marry none but a Jewess.”<sup>2</sup>

Cohen hesitated before trying to persuade Picken to convert, yet he found a willing proselyte. Cohen “portrayed in glowing colors the beauties of the Jewish religion, as handed down in the laws of Moses” and argued for “its divine origin, being the first and only true religion.” Picken was persuaded on intellectual and aesthetic grounds, agreeing “to adopt the faith of the Jewish church” because “there was great sublimity in the representation he had given me.” Though Cohen also explained Judaism as a system of theological truth, Picken was moved more by the aesthetic aspects of Jewish rituals and holidays, especially the lighting of Sabbath candles.<sup>3</sup>

Having agreed to become a Jew, Picken was trained in the practical aspects of Judaism, especially the ritual and legal matters most important to a Jewish wife. For thirty days she lived with the Lurias of Philadelphia, relatives of her soon-to-be mother-in-law. Among the Lurias she was “instructed in the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish household duties, with dietetical prohibitions and usual modes of living.” She says she found all those easy to bear, because the Jews “dress their food in a superior style to the Americans in general,” and the Sabbath meal impressed her as a ritual of great beauty.<sup>4</sup>

Once her training as a Jewish wife was complete, Jane Picken was ritually converted, a process which she described in greater detail than any other nineteenth-century American woman who converted to Judaism. The leaders took Picken to the river several miles outside Philadelphia, where “a nice little bath-room had been built over this beautiful stream, with a flight of steps to descend.”<sup>5</sup>

The bathhouse, which covered the synagogue’s *mikveh* (ritual bath), completely hid the convert

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<sup>2</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 52–53.

<sup>3</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 54–55.

<sup>4</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 56; Henry Samuel Morais, *The Jews of Philadelphia: Their History from the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time; a Record of Events and Institutions, and of Leading Members of the Jewish Community in Every Sphere of Activity* (Philadelphia: Levytype Co., 1894), 18. Picken’s concern for the quality of food may be considered part of the general refinement of America described by Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

<sup>5</sup>The *bet din* (rabbinical court) of three Jewish leaders that assembled for her conversion cannot have been comprised of rabbis, since the first permanent rabbi in America, Abraham Rice, did not settle in the United States until 1840. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 91. Cohen was not questioned about her motives for converting, which were transparently about marriage.

and her female attendant from outside eyes for modesty's sake. Wearing a veil and white robe, Picken walked down the steps into the water with her attendant, whose job it was to make sure she was completely immersed. The attendant spoke a word in Hebrew to the elders of the synagogue assembled outside, and they in turn gave a signal. She was then "pressed under the water, and allowed to rise" three times, each time at the signal of the elders. She stepped out of the water and was robed as the elders sang a hymn. During the ceremony she received the new name as a proselyte. A common choice for female converts was Ruth, after the biblical Moabite who converted to Judaism, but Jane became Sarah, after the wife of the biblical patriarch Abraham. Though an orphan, she was reborn as a proselyte with a new genealogy: "bat Avraham Avinu," "the daughter of Abraham our Father." A week later she married her own Abraham, and took his surname Cohen, the ancient Hebrew word for "priest." For the rest of her life she would sign her name "Mrs. S. J. Cohen."<sup>6</sup>

The change in her name symbolized a total transformation, yet Cohen worried that her conversion was merely nominal. Cohen would question the sincerity—and thus, the effectiveness—of her conversion for the two and a half decades she lived as a Jew. Looking back on her life as an elderly widow who had returned to Christianity, Cohen saw sincerity as the central concern in both her "ceremonial" conversion to Judaism and her "heart" conversion to Christianity.

Cohen did not begin to doubt out of guilt for converting under false pretenses. When the leader of the synagogue was explaining the duties of the law to her before her conversion, Cohen recalled, "I had only to express my wish to become a proselyte—no inquiry was made as to my motive or former belief in joining the Jewish church." It is difficult to know whether Cohen accurately remembered the questions put to her fifty years earlier; her nephew Raphael Moses believed that "she went through the usual probation of converts so as to ascertain whether she was influenced by any other motive than a conviction of the truth of Judaism."<sup>7</sup> Certainly the *halakah* (Jewish law) required, and American synagogues followed, the practice of questioning converts about whether they believed in the unity of God and were sincere in their conversion,

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<sup>6</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 63–64 My guides to the ritual and halakhic aspects of conversion to Judaism have been Menachem Finkelstein, *Conversion: Halakhah and Practice* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006); Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Theory and Practice of Welcoming Converts to Judaism: Jewish Universalism* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1992); Lawrence J. Epstein, *Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994).

<sup>7</sup>Raphael Jacob Moses, *Last Order of the Lost Cause: The Civil War Memoirs of a Jewish Family in the Old South*, ed. Mel Young (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 24–25.

even though in Cohen's case there could be no doubt that her motives were mixed. What is sure is that after her conversion to Christianity, Cohen judged the Jewish test of a convert's sincerity to be inadequate for being ceremonial rather than discerning the heart.<sup>8</sup>

However sincere her conversion, Cohen harbored mental reservations. Though the ceremony of conversion had remade her into a new person, Cohen tried to think of her new religion in terms of the old. Before converting Cohen saw in the "Jewish rites . . . nothing but what the most devout Christian might conform to." She kept a strictly observant Jewish home for several decades during her marriage, while her husband served as *hazzan* in Philadelphia and then Richmond, but she persisted for several years in thinking of the Sabbath meal as "like the Christian communion." Cohen had to face her "conscience, the silent monitor within," which "continually admonished me, that even then I was doing something wrong."<sup>9</sup>

Cohen's life as a Jew was by no means unhappy. She and her husband had, by all appearances, a loving marriage. To her new Jewish relations, her doubts were not apparent, since Cohen in all respects appeared to be a happy Jewish wife and mother. "I remember visiting her at her house in New York, in my boyhood," wrote Raphael Moses, a nephew, "when she was scrupulously particular in adhering to all Jewish forms, dieting and others, and she so remained" until late in life.<sup>10</sup> She did feel cut off from her Christian sisters and other family. Small events punctuated her life with doubt. When her first son was born, she found the circumcision so trying that she prayed she would have no more sons. From that date, about fifteen years after her conversion and eight years after the birth of her son, she began "close self-examination," which led to the feeling that she had "erred, grievously erred, in forsaking my people." Cohen began to consider herself as being under the judgment of God.<sup>11</sup>

That sense of judgment was made real with terrible directness when her son died at the age of four, and Cohen fell desperately ill.<sup>12</sup>

She and her family were living in Baltimore at the time. On her deathbed, her doctor and

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<sup>8</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 56.

<sup>9</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 55, 60, 57.

<sup>10</sup>Moses, *Last Order of the Lost Cause: The Civil War Memoirs of a Jewish Family in the Old South*, 24-25.

<sup>11</sup>To support her account, Cohen emphasizes her trials more than I have. I have inferred from her poetry about her husband and her general discussion of him, that the Cohen household was happier than her narrative might make it seem.

<sup>12</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 72, 74. Cohen's first son had died earlier, at the age of four.

her friend, both Christians, urged her to turn to Jesus. Cohen had a vision of Satan, arrayed like “one of the gay throng I had mingled with in former days,” then a vision of Jesus, bleeding, who promised, “though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as wool.”<sup>13</sup> in the morning Cohen felt that “my load of sin was gone, gone” and that “my soul [was] redeemed from death.”

“This was conversion—deep and heartfelt conversion.”<sup>14</sup> Such was Cohen’s judgment. Because this conversion was a matter of the heart, it could be sincere in a way that her conversion to Judaism was not, and it did not need the outward validation of law or ritual. The outward rituals had not turned her into a Jew, but the vision of Jesus had turned her into a Christian, and her divided soul was made whole.

The Cohens’ marriage was shaken—but not broken—by her conversion. Abraham was furious at the change in his wife, but after the initial shock, he was willing to permit his wife her Christianity, provided that she kept it a secret. Sarah, in turn, wished to do everything possible to keep the marriage together, but warned that she could bear to “be called an apostate, but never a hypocrite.”<sup>15</sup> The marriage survived because it had already been strong: Sarah Cohen always insisted that her husband was a good and gracious man. But the Cohens were able to work out that *modus vivendi* because of a shared vernacular idea about conversion.

They shared the idea that their births and education, for the one in Christianity and for the other in Judaism, formed their natural religion which conversion was not strong enough to change. Thus for Abraham, it was on the grounds that his wife “descended from Christian parents, who in early life instructed you in the Christian religion,” that he had to be reconciled to a Christian wife, though “in opposition to the tenets of that blessed religion to which by birth I am entitled, and grafted more firmly by the force of education.” In explaining her husband’s anger to her readers, Sarah asked that they “readily make allowance for one who was a Jew by birth and principle, descending in a direct line from the priesthood, an ‘Israelite,’ and one of whom it may be truly said, ‘without guile.’”<sup>16</sup> This idea was not drawn from theology, but was the resort of husbands and wives trying to understand the difficulties of intermarriage. This idea was held more widely

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<sup>13</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 85, quoting Isaiah 1:18.

<sup>14</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 85, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 91.

<sup>16</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 90, 101–2,

than by intermarried spouses.<sup>17</sup> But where Cohen's return to Christianity was seen to confirm this theory, by the end of the century conversions across religious lines had shaken, though not defeated, the idea of a natural religion.

The Cohens lived together for a decade more. There were struggles over raising the children: Sarah taught her son Henry the Lord's Prayer, and Abraham forbade him to recite it. It was the precocious conversion to Christianity of Henry, for whom Cohen titled her memoir, that forced the couple's final separation, after Henry died of scarlet fever. They separated in 1831 after twenty-five years of marriage—and Judaism. Of their daughters who survived to adulthood, one chose to live with her father as a Jew, and two with their mother as Christians. In her declining years Cohen published *Henry Luria*, a narrative testifying to her conversion and the conversion of her son.<sup>18</sup>

### **Samuel Freuder**

Samuel Freuder's life was the mirror image of Sarah Jane Cohen's. He was born a Jew, lived seventeen years as a Christian, then returned to Judaism. He served as a pulpit rabbi and as a Christian minister and missionary to the Jews. After renouncing Christianity, he published his own anti-conversion narrative, *A Missionary's Return to Judaism*. But on one point Freuder and Cohen would have agreed: sincerity was the central question in conversion. Freuder wrote about his spiritual peregrinations in several published volumes that attested to—and tested—his sincerity.<sup>19</sup>

Freuder was born in Hungary, the son and grandson of the *hazzan* of a Orthodox synagogue. As in the narratives of many Jews who converted, Freuder emphasized that he was trained in the study of Talmud over the study of the Bible, or of secular knowledge. He pursued rabbinical studies in Berlin, where he learned *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the scholarly, historical study of Jewish religion, and where he became acquainted with the emerging German Jewish Reform movement. He drifted towards Reform, but found the change shocking. He emigrated to the

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<sup>17</sup>Anne C. Rose, *Beloved Strangers: Interfaith Families in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 146–183.

<sup>18</sup>Cohen, *Henry Luria: Or, the Little Jewish Convert: Being Contained in the Memoir of Mrs. S. J. Cohen*, 105–51.

<sup>19</sup>Samuel Freuder, *A Missionary's Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews* (New York: Sinai Publishing Company, 1915); Samuel Freuder, *My Return to Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1924); "Jew Quits Christianity," *New York Times*, June 5, 1908; *New York Times*, January 14, 1916. For Freuder, see Dana Evan Kaplan, "Rabbi Samuel Freuder as a Christian Missionary: American Protestant Premillennialism and an Apostate Returner, 1891-1924," *American Jewish Archives* 50, no. 1 (1998): 41–74.

United States in 1883, intending to leave behind the “burden of learning.” There he worked as a suspender peddler for some time.<sup>20</sup>

A recommendation letter pushed Freuder to the recently formed Hebrew Union College and the ambit of Isaac Mayer Wise, leader of American Reform Judaism. Freuder spent 1884 studying at Hebrew Union College. He remained enrolled for three more years while filling a pulpit in a Georgia synagogue, preaching in English. The facts are inconclusive as to whether Freuder received a rabbinical diploma in 1886 from the College, but he took several positions as pulpit rabbi receiving Isaac Mayer Wise’s endorsement each time.<sup>21</sup> After a short, unsuccessful spell as a rabbi in San Diego, Freuder had an equally disastrous tenure as a rabbi for Congregation B’nai Israel in Davenport, Iowa. Wise attributed his lack of success to his failure to listen to the wishes of his congregation. In Iowa Freuder pursued a more radical Reform agenda than his congregation, who only a decade earlier had considered themselves Orthodox, could stomach. In 1891, before the congregation could throw him out on his ear, they received a rude shock from reading the local newspaper: Rabbi Freuder announced his conversion to Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

Freuder converted, he later claimed, because he hoped to find in Christianity the solution to the dilemmas of Reform Judaism. Where Freuder had struggled to find the dividing line between religious obligations that were essential and those that were not, Christianity, in Freuder’s admittedly ignorant conception, had at least solved that problem. Furthermore, Freuder found Jesus of Nazareth appealing as a teacher of morality and true religion. An appreciation of Jesus’ moral teachings was not uncommon among late nineteenth-century Reform Jews, whose public lectures often praised Jesus while rejecting Christianity, or “Christology,” as a Pauline accretion.<sup>23</sup> Freuder claimed that he converted because he thought “Judaism could no longer resist the buffets of the winds and waves of the modern spirit” but Christianity, having already abandoned the

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<sup>20</sup>Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews*, 20–33.

<sup>21</sup>Freuder may have been granted his diploma on the basis of his one year of study plus his study in Berlin, but his name does not appear in the Hebrew Union College yearbook as a graduate. See *Annual Report of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations* (Cincinnati: Block, 1891), 3:2800. The fullest discussion of whether Freuder actually received rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College is in Kaplan, “Rabbi Samuel Freuder as a Christian Missionary: American Protestant Premillennialism and an Apostate Returner, 1891-1924,” 42–43. But it is clear that Freuder was regarded as a rabbi by both Jews and Christians throughout his life.

<sup>22</sup>Freuder’s conversion was reported in other newspapers as well, such as the Mormon paper *Deseret Weekly* 43 (September 26, 1891), 439.

<sup>23</sup>Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews*, 17; Joseph Krauskopf, *Jewish Converts, Perverts and Dissenters* (Philadelphia: Oscar Klonower, 1891), 12–14. Cf. Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 159–306; Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2004).

law, could inaugurate the “brotherhood of man.”<sup>24</sup> These explanations square with Freuder’s own religious trajectory and with the sometimes blurred lines between radical reform and liberal Christianity in the late nineteenth century.

But in recounting the reasons for his conversion after returning to Judaism, Freuder carefully constructed a conversion narrative that was the inverse of the typical conversion to Christianity. The typical conversion narrative described the workings of the soul, and a sense of incompleteness, sinfulness, distance from God, and judgment—the classic sinful self of evangelical Protestantism, or even the “sick soul” or “divided self” of William James’s later analysis. In Freuder’s narrative, his soul was sick and his self divided *after* conversion. Conversion separated Freuder from his true self, and made him no longer a righteous Jew but a hypocritical Christian. The ever-present theme of Freuder’s story, which he tried to convey in his last speech as a Christian to assembled missionaries to the Jews, was this: “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.”<sup>25</sup> Freuder turned the question of sincerity—in the sense of genuineness or authenticity—on its head. Conversion was a fall, a conversion to insincerity, not sincerity. To become a convert by faith was to lose one’s *bona fides*. Freuder’s other challenge to the standard conversion narrative was the charge that conversions were not a matter of the heart, but of the pocketbook. But he could not so neatly flip the standard calculus of sincerity because every piece of evidence that he lined up to disprove the sincerity of converts from Judaism and Christian missionaries necessarily called into question Freuder’s own sincerity before the Christian and Jewish audiences who might regard him as a double traitor.

Freuder’s baptism was the scene of just one of the many shouting matches (and occasional fisticuffs) that took place between Jews and Christians in Christian mission halls and Jewish street corners in nineteenth-century cities. Freuder was baptized at the Chicago Hebrew Mission by a professor in the Chicago Divinity School. As the waters of baptism trickled from the hand of the minister down Freuder’s head, a cadre of Jews assembled to watch Freuder’s apostasy headed for the exit. While the congregation sang a hymn, “a few [of the Jews], on reaching the door, turned around and shouted to me, ‘How much did you get for this?’ ”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews*, 41, 40–43.

<sup>25</sup>Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews*, 12.

<sup>26</sup>Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews*, 38.



After returning to Judaism, Freuder thought that was the right question to ask every convert from Judaism to Christianity—even himself. He accused converts and especially converts who became missionaries of becoming Christians in pursuit of the dollar, not deliverance. Freuder had a host of stories about the greed of converts that played off stereotypes of the money-hungry, dishonest Jew: the convert who asked for travel fare and other small expenses at every turn, the potential convert who received a dime for attending a mission hall meeting, or the actual convert who received money from the missionary for testifying to his conversion—money drawn from the missionary’s own take from the offering or from wealthy Christian donors. Another story told of a group of (again, stereotyped) unscrupulous but entrepreneurial Jews who learned the stock phrases of conversion narratives and testified at meetings for laughs and for money to buy their meals. Freuder add that “it was not impossible, though highly improbable,” that the impostor “acted his part so well that even the missionary was deceived.” In telling that story, Freuder was implying that because false converts were skillful at manipulating conversion stories, genuine conversion narratives could not be discerned from lies.<sup>27</sup>

Most damning of all were not the anecdotes, but what they added up to: Jews were converting not because they received the gift of the gospel, but because they were purchased in market transactions. Freuder described how this market functioned. Wealthy Christian donors gave funds to missionaries and mission houses. These missionaries in turn passed on gifts (read: bribes) small and large to entice Jews to feign conversion. The potentially convertible Jew came to the mission hall for a dime or a meal, might be baptized for the sum of \$20, and sometimes he stayed on for a career as a missionary taking a salary to convert others. The missionaries’ reports of these conversions to donors were so many balance sheets, meant to keep the money flowing. In this economic system, Jews—like financial instruments—were convertible to cash.

Freuder tried his best to describe his own life as an exception to that economic system. He cast his own conversion narrative in the form of a cross examination to test his truthfulness, even binding himself with an curse. Freuder claimed that he had never baptized a Jew. Despite his efforts, the pattern he pointed out could be seen in the life of Freuder himself: a jobless rabbi turned seminary student, then a missionary, then a colporteur or Bible salesman, then a lecturer demonstrating the “morning prayers of a Jew” before paying Christian audiences, and finally a

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<sup>27</sup>Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews*, 84–85.

missionary again, who turned into an anti-missionary Jewish publisher.

The bottom line of Freuder's accounting was that "professional converts" were running a "business of turning Jews into Christians." No matter how much Americans liked business, they did not like it to cloud religion, and the business of conversion meant that no conversion of a Jew could be judged sincere.

### **Other converts who returned**

I've told two stories today, both about people who converted along the axis of Christianity and Judaism. I could bring up any number of other individuals along those lines, whom I've begun to catalog in the American Converts Database.<sup>28</sup> Let me mention a few others converts who also experienced a deconversion very briefly.

Joshua Seixas was the son of the famed Gershom Mendes Seixas, the first native-born Jewish minister in the United States. Joshua converted to Christianity and taught Hebrew at Oberlin College, the school founded by the evangelist Charles Grandison Finney. But in 1836, Seixas was instructing a different pupil: at Kirtland, Ohio he taught Hebrew to the prophet and founder of the Latter Day Saints, Joseph Smith, to whom he gave a certificate acknowledging that Smith had "been indefatigable in acquiring the principles of the sacred language of the Old Testament Scriptures." But within a few months Seixas had drifted away from the Mormons, and returned to mainstream Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

Henry Gersoni was born in Vilna, then converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity in St. Petersburg. He repented of his conversion publicly in a Jewish newspaper, *Ha-Maggid*, but on his his emigration to England, he was accused of living in a Christian mission house. After emigrating to the United States Gersoni was generally accepted, but he was marked as someone who had tried to cross a forbidden line. [^169]

The famous biblical scholar Arnold B. Ehrlich was born in Poland, Russia, learned Greek Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, and German. In 1868 at the age of 20 he was baptized into Christianity. He

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<sup>28</sup>Erin Bartram and Lincoln Mullen, The American Converts Database, <http://americanconverts.org>.

<sup>29</sup>Seixas Family Papers, American Jewish Historical Society/Center for Jewish History, New York. Certificate from Joshua Seixas, 30 March 1836, Joseph Smith Papers, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/certificate-from-joshua-seixas-30-march-1836>. Shalom Goldman, "Joshua/James Seixas (1802-1874): Jewish Apostasy and Christian Hebraism in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *Jewish History* 7, no. 1 (1993): 65-88, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20101144>.

worked with the Christian biblical scholar Franz Delitzsch to translate the New Testament into Hebrew, a work which he later claimed was almost entirely his own. But upon emigrating to the United States in 1876, he requested that Rabbi Gustav Gottheil assemble a *beth din* to receive him back to Judaism. He made this remarkable declaration:

I was born in Poland of Jewish parents and reared in the knowledge and practice of the Jewish religion; at the age of twenty-three I emigrated to Germany and, tempted by the prospects of a better position than I imagined I could ever attain as an Israelite, I became an apostate to my ancestral faith, and was received into the Christian Church. But although my expectations were, to a great extent, realized, I gradually awakened to a sense of my guiltiness and this feeling has now grown into a deep and heartfelt sorrow for what I had done. It is now my most earnest desire to return to my ancestral religion and to devote my whole life to the task of redeeming my past error; and I make this declaration as in the presence of God, the searcher of hearts and before you as representatives of the Jewish religion.

The *beth din* accepted Ehrlich back to Judaism, and wrote,

Having reasons for believing Mr. Ehrlich's repentance and determination with regard to the future to be sincere, we accepted them and drew up this minute as an evidence of what took place today before us.<sup>30</sup>

## Stories and Sincerity

We can make a few general observations about these converts who returned to their birth religion.

First, returning to one's original faith is connected the phenomenon of multiple conversions. Many people who convert, convert multiple times. For the nineteenth century, the best known example was Orestes Augustus Brownson, who was Congregationalist, then Presbyterian, then Universalist, then Unitarian, then Transcendentalist, and finally, staunchly Roman Catholic. Now depending on how you look at it people who convert and return to their faith are people who experience multiple conversions by definition. Nevertheless, we can observe that people who set

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<sup>30</sup>Richard Gottheil, *The Life of Gustav Gottheil: Memoir of a Priest in Israel* (Williamsport, PA: Bayard Press, 1936), 75-77; Jacob Kabakoff, "New Light on Arnold Bogomil Ehrlich," *American Jewish Archives* 36 (1984): 202-24.

out to change their faith are much more likely to change it again, and it's not surprising that some of them find their original faith a safer port than they originally thought.

Second, returning to one's original faith is connected to the life cycle. The life cycle often influences conversion: people often convert after their parents have died, after their children are born. Even today children even are the most common reason why people become more religious. In Cohen's case, she returned to Christianity because of the circumcision of her son, a ritual fraught with meaning, and her narrative actually bears the title of her other son, *Henry Luria*. In Freuder's case, he saw his already dead father in Park Street Church as he renounced Christianity and returned to Judaism.

But most important, the return of converts is a way of questioning the sincerity of the entire exercise of conversion. Cohen and Freuder told their stories in an attempt to establish the controlling story of conversion between Christianity and Judaism. Their narratives do represent many of the themes of Jewish-Christian conversion, which bear enumeration. Cohen's immersion in the *mikveh* and Freuder's baptism are examples of the rituals of conversion. Like Cohen, most people who converted between Judaism and Christianity did so because of intermarriages, and conversion often ran in the family. Freuder's narrative shows something of the logic of conversion, but also the ill will it could stir up, while Cohen's conversion shows the passion or beauty of conversion, but also something of the good will that could be maintained between the two religions. Both Cohen and Freuder published their narratives in print, a nod to the power of the press to influence public opinion of converts and to shape the stories they told. That neither Freuder or Cohen could remain in their chosen religion but reverted to the religion of their birth is a testimony to the difficulty of conversion between Judaism and Christianity and the tremendous power of the religion of one's birth, though many converts never reverted to their first religion. The most important observation to be drawn from the two stories is that converts both to and from Judaism were consumed with questions of sincerity.

Though sincerity was a central question in many religious conversions, the way sincerity was tested in nineteenth-century conversions between Christianity and Judaism differed in an important way. In the kinds of evangelical or revivalist conversions that have received the most discussion in American religious history, to be sincere meant that one was truthful before God and the church, and perhaps also that one was authentic to oneself. That sincerity would be tested

by pastors and by congregations, and in the workings of God on the convert's heart—but those judges were on the same side as the convert. Converts between Judaism and Christianity, however, had their sincerity tested not just by the religion that received them, but by the religion they left. In the unending polemical debates between Jews and Christians, carried on in newspapers, books, and pamphlets, on street corners and in homes, synagogues, and churches, converts had their sincerity tested in the assayer's fire.<sup>31</sup>

Converts who returned cast doubt on the sincerity of other converts. Their return called into question whether people could choose a religion other than the religion in which they had been born and raised.

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<sup>31</sup>For a long history of the authenticity of the self, see Charles Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).