

DIVIDED SOULS

Converts from Judaism
in Germany, 1500–1750

Elisheva Carlebach

Yale University Press/New Haven & London

Published with assistance from
The Koret Foundation Jewish Studies Publication Fund
The Lucius N. Littauer Foundation

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Designed by Mary Valencia
Set in Bembo type by Tseng Information Systems, Inc., Durham, North Carolina.
Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Chelsea, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Carlebach, Elisheva.
Divided souls : converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750 / Elisheva Carlebach.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-300-08410-2
1. Christian converts from Judaism—Europe, German-speaking—History. I. Title.
BV2620 .C37 2001
248.2'46—dc21 00-053433

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Oma Esther
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"Bobby," Lotte (Elisheva) לבה"ל

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of the great pleasures of completing a project of long duration is the opportunity it provides to acknowledge the many institutions and individuals whose resources made the work possible. The idea for this book arose during a respite afforded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities; I shared the first fruits of this work at a conference of the American Historical Association. I thank the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the PSC/CUNY Research Award Program for funds to travel to collections in the United States and abroad. A Queens College Presidential Research Award and an award from the Littauer Foundation afforded me precious time to pursue the research and writing of this book, and a subvention from the Koret Foundation helped to underwrite the final expenses related to preparing illustrations and publishing the book.

For innumerable hours, libraries have been my home, their books my constant companions, their staffs my guides to their resources. This book could not have come into being without the dedicated help of the staff at The Jewish Theological Seminary Library: Rabbi Jerry Schwarzbard, Librarian, Special Collections, and David Wachtel, Research Associate, Special Collections. Sharon Liberman Mintz, Curator of Jewish Art, and Havva Charm, Research Associate, were extraordinarily generous with their time and expertise. Dr. Phillip Miller and the staff of the Hebrew Union College Library in New York; Dr. David Gilner at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati; the staff at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem; Etty Liebes of the Scholem Library and Dr. Avraham David of the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts; Dr. Michael Terry and the staff at the New York Public Library's Jewish Division; Dr. Diane Spielman and the staff at the Leo Baeck Institute. I thank the Universitätsbibliothek München for sending me a microfilm copy of Antonius Margaritha's "Ain kurtzer Bericht// vnd anzaigung."

It has been my good fortune to benefit from the wise advice, supportive collegiality, and warm friendship of Marion Kaplan at the History Department at Queens College. Stephen Burnett has been a patient and encyclopedic resource; Mark R. Cohen, Yaakov Deutsch, Edward Fram, Jonathan Elukin, Martin Pine,

and an anonymous reader for Yale University Press read and commented on portions of the manuscript, to its great benefit. Olga Litvak contributed immensely to the final shape of this book, marking every page with her unsparing critical intelligence. Malka Gold provided technical expertise at every turn, dispensed with her inimitable cheer and generous spirit. Malka, “eyn kamokh!” I thank Dr. Benny Ogorek, Dr. Kristin Peterson, Marina Rustow, and David Wachtel, true friends who helped me greatly in the final stages of the book.

Meir Simcha, who missed being mentioned in my last book, has lived up to his name in every way.

INTRODUCTION

What did it mean to be a Jew turned Christian in medieval and early modern Europe? Medieval religious usage borrowed the term *conversion* from the al/chemical sciences as a metaphor, in which one substance was changed into something utterly different by a mysterious process. Conceptions of transformation or rebirth had always informed the imagery of Christian conversion. In conversion to Christianity, divine grace transfigured the soul, created it anew, so that no residue of the earlier self remained. In German lands, from the sixteenth century, this belief in the indelible power of baptism began to erode in the case of Jewish converts. Christians believed that the Jewish nature of the converts inhered so deeply that no baptismal chrism could reconfigure it. These more fixed attitudes about their Jewishness form the backdrop for the voices and experiences of the converts in this book. Although they continued to refer to themselves as newborns, Christians saw them as “taufjuden,” baptized, but not truly converted.

Converts in the History of German Jewry

For the chronological scope of this book, I adopt the term “early modern” to denote a period which extends from the early sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century. In German history, these years form a distinct historical unit, bounded by Luther’s Reformation and the rapid expansion of print on one end and the rise of Prussia’s centralized state on the other. The linguistic-cultural concept of a German *Sprachraum* serves most conveniently in this period in lieu of a political unit. Although attitudes toward Jews and conversion varied from one small sovereign entity to another, theological and popular lay thinking on these issues often transcended such boundaries.

The forces for change in the sixteenth century overturned attitudes toward Jewish conversion that stemmed from centuries earlier, during the Crusades. The first crusaders violated the traditional tolerance of Jews that had prevailed in Christian Europe. Jews had lived securely as merchants, as subjects, and as neighbors among Christians. The confidence that German Jews had expressed prior to the First Crusade testified to their sense of belonging within their communities. The crusaders refused to regard the Jews as just another piece in the patchwork of

2 INTRODUCTION

a multilayered feudal and corporate medieval society. Enemies of Christ, thorns in the body of Christendom: to the crusaders, Jews posed no less danger to Christian society than the fabled Moors from a distant land. While some individual Christians and some entire Christian communities justified Jewish trust by extending protection to their Jewish neighbors, in many instances burghers joined forces with crusaders, and bishops and princes threw up their hands in resignation. It appeared as though many elements in Christian society had reached a consensus with the most extreme pronouncements of crusader zeal. Christian society did not absorb this radical redefinition overnight; complete implementation of its consequences took centuries more. Implacable Christian foes of Jewish existence in Europe gradually implemented the ideas that had been unleashed by the violence of the crusaders. A voluminous literature exists about the place of Jews in the medieval Christian mind: demons, sorcerers, rapacious usurers and ritual murderers—the catalogue is endless and well known. Under the best of circumstances Jews were forced to live apart, to be marked as different, to earn a living in the most socially abhorrent manner; under the worst they were banned, expelled, libeled, condemned, and sentenced to collective death. There is far less material devoted to exploring the common spaces shared by Jews and Christians and their more quotidian exchanges with one another. Yet Jews and Christians had always interacted economically and socially. The possibility of leaving the Jewish fold, escaping the ranks of the scorned and detested, always existed for Jews.

The confrontation with the crusaders changed the definition of baptism of Jews in both the Christian and Jewish mind. Neither group could continue to view the baptism of Jews as a voluntary act that initiated a transformation of identity. The radical behavior of the crusaders turned baptism of Jews into a symbol of violent conflict. Since medieval Christian theologians did not vehemently oppose violent baptisms, such baptisms were ultimately accepted as legitimate, giving rise to a lingering popular suspicion that no true conversion had taken place—hence, the figure that was no longer a real Jew, yet not a real Christian, a counterfeit human being.

For Jews the change was just as extreme. Faced with the choice of conversion to a triumphalist Christianity or death, shocked Ashkenazic Jews idealized martyrdom and shunned conversion. The image of baptism inscribed in the Hebrew Crusade chronicles was one of violence, of violation, of the ultimate defilement of Jewishness. Leaders enjoined even the weakest Jews to counter the onslaught with active martyrdom; any lesser response left an ineradicable stain upon the Jewish soul. Over the next centuries, in episode after violent episode, a cruel choice was presented to the Jews of Europe: convert to Christianity or be

killed. The Jews of Ashkenaz subsequently reenacted the initial Jewish repudiation of baptism many times. Jewish sources repeated and reinforced the disdain for, and condemnation of, the converts.

Lewis Rambo has suggested that the very dramatic language of death and rebirth in Christianity helped form the Christian sense of conversion as a violent and dramatic process; that the old must die before the new can come into being.¹ While under the best of circumstances, conversion by members of a minority to the majority religion or culture proved difficult, medieval Jews traversed the psychological, communal, religious, and political distance from despised Other to the compact, and often persecuting, majority in a particularly traumatic and complex passage. The figure of the baptized Jew, the liminal Jew-Christian, stood at the margins of Jewish fears and Christian hostility.

Not until the period inaugurated by Luther's Reformation and the rise of German humanism did the medieval notion of absolute opposition, in which Jews and Christians stood poised as mortal foes until the end of time, give way to one in which the lines became less sharp. Historians have long viewed the Reformation as the distinctive event that shaped German identity, as surely as political moments shaped the identities of other European nations. Even without subscribing to that view, the development of the German language and its standardization through print, the growth of German literature, the humanist movement in German lands, and the confessionalization of German society all lent force to the emergence of a sense of national character and identity without a congruent political entity. The early modern centuries that form the chronological center of this book transformed notions of identity and community for Christians in German lands as well as for Jews.

This book attempts a close reading of the conversion experience of Jews in early modern German lands for what it can teach us about Christian self-definition and Jewish identity in German lands, and about those Jews who crossed the boundary-lines. Jews who converted voluntarily to Christianity in the early modern period experienced profound unease and discomfort with their indeterminate status. Although they abjured their Jewish religion, elements of their Jewish identities remained, and they asserted that their Jewishness formed a positive component of their new identities. In doing so, converts reversed the state of absolute opposition that had characterized medieval Jewish-Christian relations.

In their quest to find acceptance and forge a sense of community, converts to Christianity in early modern German lands turned out an enormous body of literature, much of it autobiographical. I have tried to let them speak in their own voices wherever possible. Their need to find individual accommodation between their own conflicted Jewish and Christian selves prefigured the debate over the

place of Jews in modern European society. Historians of the Jews adopted a view of the converts similar to that of medieval Jewish communities. They regarded converts either as traitors, as a weak and dispensable element, or simply as lost souls whose choice to leave the fold excised them conclusively from Jewish history. They did not view converts as providing a usable past for modern Jews. While these judgments are valid in some cases, the collective historical influence of the converts was complex and enduring. They did not simply disappear within the majority. The barriers to swift assimilation made them the first German Jews to experience the consequences of a dual identity even after they had chosen to leave the confines of the Jewish community. The new obstacles they faced served to demonstrate that leaving Judaism for Christianity was never a simple transformation.

The World of Islam

The contrast between the Jewish experience of conversion to Christianity and that of Jews in another monotheistic universe of faith, Islam, could not be starker. Unlike the great theological weight attached to every conversion from Judaism in the Christian world, conversions of Jews in medieval Islam were regarded as more neutral events. With a few notable exceptions, Muslims did not exert particular pressure on medieval Jews to adopt Islam, nor did they engage in missionary activity among the Jews. In fact, no separate class of Muslim theologians existed for the primary purpose of fostering missionary activity. Rather, Muslim individuals such as soldiers, traders, and Sufi saints, as well institutions and intermarriage, accounted for the majority of converts to Islam.² Individuals from all ranks of Jewish society sometimes found it more convenient to join the ruling religion, with no hindrances to prevent them from doing so.³ As one eighteenth-century Jewish traveler noted, “The arabs will not debate matters concerning their religion neither among themselves nor with anyone else lest they be defeated and weakened in their faith. They do not urge anyone to adopt their religion but if a person is heard saying the words . . . ‘My Master Muhamad is God’s messenger,’ whether in jest or in error he has to convert or be burnt alive.”⁴

The only formal act required of sixteenth-century Jewish converts to Islam was to make a statement, not necessarily before an official body. Even for those who wished to make a formal declaration before the Kadi with two witnesses, the ceremonies on record show that the converts’ obligations were minimal. The convert had to prove that he was not a minor, and that he acted freely, without compulsion. Then the convert made two pronouncements, *shahadas*. One declaration affirmed belief in Allah and his prophets; the other, that the convert had “gone out of the Jewish religion” and would adhere to Islam from then on. The

convert then threw away the yellow turban, and from that moment he became a *muhtadi*, one who has come onto the right path. Many converts did not change their names, some even remained in the Jewish quarter. Moreover, conversion generally remained a marginal phenomenon which did not affect the internal life and conduct of the Jewish community.⁵

Because the Jews of medieval Islam had integrated more successfully into the rhythms of daily life of their Muslim neighbors, even an exceptional episode of violent coercion did not produce as deep an inner rupture as the same act engendered among Jews within Christendom. In cases where Muslims used force to effect conversion, Jews in the medieval Islamic milieu tended to pay lip service to Islam as a necessary, albeit temporary, stratagem for survival. Genizah scholar S. D. Goitein explained the seemingly negligible disruptive force of Jewish conversion to Islam under even the most traumatic circumstances as a product of their close interaction on a regular basis.⁶ Minorities living amidst a numerically overwhelming majority took part in the others' lives, "according to local custom and a natural, if unpredictable, intermingling of sensibility among populations living in the same place."⁷

During the twelfth-century Almohad conquest of southern Spain, forced conversion created a class of secret Jews with all the repercussions and permutations so familiar from the later, more pervasive instance of the Iberian Marranos. Sephardic Jewish leaders reacted by creating a literature of consolation rather than of scorn, vigorously refuting Jewish attitudes that repudiated forced converts to Islam.⁸

Nehemiah Levtzion has emphasized another aspect of Jewish conversion to Islam. Jews converting under coercion to Islam generally converted as a community. Unlike those of Ashkenaz, they tended to retain their communal structure even under circumstances of coerced conversion. Assimilation of a community of converts within the Islamic world tended to be extremely slow even when it was willing; the pace was even slower when it was coerced. These circumstances allowed the community to develop collective strategies for survival. Few comparable instances occurred in Ashkenaz.

The core of the Sephardic strategy can be gleaned from Maimonides' directions to the community converted under duress.

I will specify here the proper way for a person to view himself in these days of coerced conversion: Anyone who cannot leave . . . must look upon himself as one who profanes God's name, not exactly willingly but almost so. At the same time he must bear in mind that if he fulfils a precept, God will reward him doubly . . . It is not right to alienate, scorn, and hate people

who desecrate the Sabbath . . . Do not despise the *poshe'a* (evildoer) in Israel when he comes to perform an observance secretly . . . 'for I will pardon those I allow to survive' [Jeremiah 50:20].⁹

The strategy articulated by Maimonides simply denied the efficacy of coerced conversion. While it was far from an ideal state of Jewish existence, the mechanism of conversion was meaningless. It left the Jewish status of the convert unaffected: the only thing that mattered was the forced violation of certain Jewish laws. Regardless of what the Muslims said or did, those commandments were still in full force vis-à-vis the unwillingly converted Jew. In this view, the mechanism of conversion to Islam, the *shahada*, the verbal proclamation that effected the transition was utterly meaningless. "*Ein kofin bo ki im al ha-dibbur bi-levad.*" The coercion amounted to pronouncement of empty words. Precisely because Maimonides regarded Islam as an imposter religion, he maintained that its conversion process meant nothing, and his influence dominated the Sephardic posture toward coercive conversion. Both *taqiyya* and marranism, pretenses of apostasy, constitute subversive rejections of violent conversions. (Halakhic evaluations of these acts constitute a separate and complex subject.)

The lack of any expectation that Jewish converts to Islam serve a special theological purpose stands in greatest contrast to the experience of Jewish converts to Christianity. While converts from Judaism in Christian lands were employed as particularly effective and knowledgeable missionizers, no similar expectation existed for Jewish converts to Islam. In the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church reaffirmed its commitment to train new converts, "so that from those [who have lately converted] shall come forth workers suitable for the work of the Gospel, who will be able to preach the mysteries of the Christian faith in every land where Jews and other infidels dwell."¹⁰ Conversely, when Christians began to reconquer Spain and large numbers of Muslims converted to Christianity, the "Christians did not, by and large, experience the Muslims as jurists, theologians, philosophers, and political theorists. They experienced them as a social community, . . . with whom they had to deal."¹¹ Only the relationship between Judaism and Christianity produced the expectation that converts from Judaism would play a special role.

Converts from Judaism occupied a preeminent place in the imaginations of both Jews and Christians, and their singular status made the smooth integration of first-generation converts an impossibility. Converts served the Jewish-Christian confrontation not only in discrete practical capacities, but as a trope, a figure of the imagination onto which beliefs and fears concerning Jews were projected. The argument of Sander Gilman, that in reacting to converts, early

modern Christians were projecting their deepest fears and beliefs concerning Jews, helps to explain why different Christian societies regarded converts from Judaism in distinctive ways.

Iberian Divergences

The late medieval Christian society that confronted the question of Jewish converts on the grandest scale was the Iberian. In the late fifteenth century, Spain and Portugal were moving toward political consolidation, national unity, and religious homogeneity. For our purposes, it remains most instructive to note how Jews of Spain and Portugal absorbed the conversion ethos of their Judeo-Muslim past, rather than the Judeo-Christian present. The vast legal and procedural literature, as well as the corpus of halakhic material concerning converted Jews that developed in Iberia, present rich sources for historians seeking to understand the politics of mass conversion and the persistence of Jewish identity. The sheer number of conversions in Iberia, along with the naked use of coercion, are unparalleled in scale for any other Jewish community at any other time or place.

Despite the uniqueness of scale, there are certain features of the Iberian conversion experience which can be instructive in a comparative context. The pressure on Iberian Jews to convert left no party under the illusion that most converts had experienced spiritual epiphanies. Consequently, "old" Christians believed that Jewish mental structures and social habits continued even after the historical cessation of professing Judaism. The Inquisitors formulated a definition of Judaizing which emphasized a set of practices rather than beliefs. This led to the ultimate rejection of the converts and their descendants by that society. The lines of continuity and contact between Iberian Inquisitors of the Dominican order and their counterparts in German lands will be explored below.

Italian Parallels

Of all the Jewish communities in western Europe, Italian Jewry paralleled German Jewry most closely in demographic structure and political predicament. In both German and Italian lands, a loose constellation of independent cities and autonomous principalities each regarded Jews within the local context. Jews lived in relatively large numbers in some Italian cities, and dispersed more thinly throughout other regions, particularly the north. Papal control over a vast area, combined with the Catholic Church's ambiguous message of contemptuous toleration of Jews, complicated the picture of Jewish conversion in Italian lands. The constant interference by other powers, particularly Spain, as they gained hegemony over Italian cities, further knotted the strands of influence.¹² Jews, as well as their tormentors, easily crossed the borders between northern Italian and

southern German lands. The late fifteenth-century ritual murder case of Simon of Trent, in which the prosecutors accused the Jews of Regensburg of having conspired with those of Trent, provides a case in point.

From the sixteenth century, fear of the growing strength of Protestantism led the Catholic Church to the polemical barricades. During the years of the Council of Trent, the church designated conversion of Jews as one of the hallmarks of true Christianity and undertook a highly organized drive to convert Jews.¹³ While not all historians agree with Kenneth Stow that conversionary zeal lay at the core of all papal Jewry policy after the Pope issued the bull *Cum nimis absurdum* in 1555, it is indisputable that the Catholic Church engaged in more vigorous missionary activity than ever before. The establishment of Houses of Catechumens in Rome, Venice, Modena, and other cities by the Catholic Church, the introduction of an Inquisition, and the institution of forced missionary sermons, all aided the effort to bring Jews to Christianity.

In addition to external religious pressure, Jews in Italy followed cultural and intellectual paths to conversion. Ideas which seeped through the porous ghetto walls served as a cause of subtle internal erosion of Jewish faith. During the Renaissance, Jewish intellectuals mingled with Christians, learned from their classical texts, taught them Hebrew and Kabbalah, and some ultimately converted. These figures include Immanuel Tremellius, Sixtus Senensis, and Paul Eustachius. Their existence suggests that the pressures on Italian Jews to convert were not all related to church initiatives.¹⁴ While there are no firm overall numbers for any land, the lists and records that do survive suggest that the rate of Jewish conversion to Christianity from the second half of the sixteenth century in Italy was relatively high.¹⁵

As in early modern German lands, conversion from Judaism in Italy through the eighteenth century was not a ticket for Jews wishing to assimilate rapidly into the highest social circles of Christian society.¹⁶ Renata Segre suggests that the combined pressures of secular and ecclesiastical authorities, relentless harassment in the form of forced preaching, abduction of children, and other threats tended to induce the most vulnerable individuals to convert.¹⁷ This may explain why most converts in Italy did not rise to positions of power or prestige. Apart from service in the church itself, they did not follow an easy path toward integration into Catholic society. After expending an extraordinary amount of resources to achieve conversions, Italian Catholic society did remarkably little with the converts.¹⁸ Even in cases of noble or wealthy Jewish origins, and prestigious godparents, Italian converts from Judaism could not marry into good society.¹⁹ It is unclear whether this was a cause or an effect of Christian attitudes toward the converts. The suspicion that converts emerged from the lower classes of Jewish

society may have influenced Christian attitudes toward them; continuing discrimination even after baptism may have prevented more well-born Jews from being enticed by conversion. Like their German counterparts, many Italian neophytes earned from their conversions merely a license to beg; one even specialized in the unmasking of rival neophytes whose licenses were false. Some converts carved out niches for themselves as censors of Hebrew books, and then as cataloguers of collections which came into Christian hands.²⁰ A few became teachers of Hebrew, like their German counterparts who looked to academic careers in which they could make use of their backgrounds. For both Italian and German converts, designation of their convert status formed part of their Christian biography, effectively integrating their Jewish origins into their new Christian identities.

English Reticence

Converts from Judaism in the history and imagination of England have been the subject of several recent innovative studies. James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews*, Todd Endelman's *Radical Assimilation*, and Michael Ragussis' *Figures of Conversion* each contribute to our understanding of the formation of English identity, Jewishness as a foil to the emerging sense of Englishness, and the problematics of conversion within this context.²¹ For centuries after the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, no professing Jews resided in England. Jews remained in the cultural and literary imaginations of the English, although no Jewish community existed to lend reality to these images. The deep fears of the English regarding Jews took on particular characteristics. For the English, the Jew was circumciser, waiting to carve the flesh of Christians, most famously embodied in Shylock and his pound of flesh.

The first Jews to return to England did so under cover of secrecy. Baptized Spanish and Portuguese Marranos settled in Protestant England, believing themselves secure from the common enemy, Spain. Once they received tacit permission from Cromwell to live as Jews, their numbers gradually grew. The former Marranos who founded the Sephardic Jewish community in London embraced the culture and society of England, having been educated in non-Jewish environments in Iberia. Ashkenazic Jews appeared in large numbers in England from the late seventeenth century. As they prospered, many members of the most successful classes began a climb into English society that led to conversion and intermarriage with Christians. Todd Endelman, who characterized this trajectory as a process of "drift and defection," noted that "English Jews who converted almost never recorded their reasons for doing so—unlike their counterparts in German-speaking lands."²² Moreover, once converted, they found few obstacles

to complete integration into English society, unlike converted Jews in German lands.

This book focuses on the dynamics of Jewish conversion to Christianity in German lands in the two centuries after the Reformation. The writings of converts from Judaism illuminate and give individual voice to the world they left, the world they entered, and the unabating tensions between them. The converts played a central role in shaping the images of Jews and Judaism held by Christians, the self-perception of Jews, and the internalization of the Christian critique by German Jews.

The first chapter traces the image of converts from Judaism in the medieval Ashkenazic tradition. The Jewish community portrayed converts as emerging from marginal elements of Jewish society, although kinship and property often necessitated ties between converts and Jews. The second introduces medieval Christianity and its periodic obsession with obtaining converts from Judaism. Christian authorities expended resources to secure Jewish converts in far greater proportion than they did for any other group. Medieval Jews who converted often played public roles in advancing the anti-Jewish polemic at critical junctures. Medieval Jewish and Christian society essentially repudiated the person and the motives of the converts. The third and fourth chapters assess some of the changes in early sixteenth-century German society that brought converts widespread public notice. The central role of converts and the wide dissemination of converts' writings were propelled by the Reformation and confessionalization of early modern German lands. The attendant eschatological expectation in the Christian world, messianic movements in the Jewish world, and the rapid rise of inexpensive print all set the stage for the emergence of converts into public awareness. Chapters 5–8 analyze the journey of early modern converts through the thicket of conflicting perceptions of their motives and their attempts to construct new identities and find new communities. The converts produced a variety of autobiographical texts, the primary sources for penetrating their world. These texts illuminate the Jewish childhoods of the converts, their social and intellectual status, and their experiences of the process of conversion. I have attempted to trace their subsequent successes or failures to integrate into Christian society, the lingering economic, linguistic, and social barriers, through their own writing. Chapters 9 and 10 address the extensive literature of representation of Judaism written by the converts, the new contours they introduced into the Jewish-Christian polemic, and their role in the leading legal and cultural controversies of their time. Chapter 11 concludes with the ambiguities and changes in position of the converts in the Age of the Enlightenment and beyond.

Chapter 1

THE MEDIEVAL LEGACY

Converts in the Culture of Ashkenaz

Although he has sinned, he remains a Jew.

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin: 44a

The apostate to idolatry is like a non-Jew in all respects.

Maimonides, Hilkhot Avodah Zara, 2:4

“Forced Conversion of the Local Jews, But Business as Usual”?¹ Historian S. D. Goitein chose this caption to introduce an episode of forced conversion of a medieval Islamic Jewish community. It resembles the formulation of Maimonides in his Epistle on Martyrdom: “From the day we were exiled from our land persecution (*shmad* = forced conversion) has been our unending lot, ‘Because from our youth it has grown along with us like a father and has directed us from our mother’s womb.’”² These expressions of conversion as exilic “business as usual” could never have been used to announce similar events among the Jews of medieval Christian Europe. The medieval Jews of Ashkenaz never regarded conversion by a Jew to Christianity, regardless of the circumstances, as “usual business.”

If there is one issue that represents the difference between the historical experience of the Jews of Ashkenaz (whose primary cultural influence was the Christian world) and that of the Jews of Sepharad (primarily developed within the Muslim world) through the ages, it is their reaction when faced with coerced conversion. With significant exceptions on both sides, the ideal response in Ashkenaz was martyrdom, while the prototypical response in Sepharad was *taqiyya*, or marranism, the pretense of apostasy until the persecution passed. Since the meaning of Jewish conversions in early modern German lands, the subject of this book, can only be understood within the context of the medieval Ashkenazic legacy, it is important to know why these conversions called up such a rich fund of negative associations among Jews.

The historical and cultural forces that shaped Jewish perceptions of conversion to Christianity in the medieval world all but precluded a view of conversion as a spiritual odyssey. The repeated bitter experience of violent compulsion to baptism contributed to the absolute rejection of conversion by Jews of Ashkenaz and turned willing converts into renegade figures regarded with the greatest loathing and derision. These Jews regarded baptism as a betrayal of communal values, a rejection of Jewish destiny, a submission to the illusory verdict of history. The very terminology used to designate converts from Judaism speaks most eloquently of the posture of that community toward converts. Ashkenazic Jews most frequently used the term *meshummad*, from the root *shmad*, meaning utter destruction, and implying the absolute loss of that soul from the Jewish community.³ In the words of one Ashkenazic grammarian, “The root derives from ‘to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate.’ We call a Jew who converts ‘meshummad’ because the phenomenon of conversion began at a time of ‘shmad’ [violent coercion], and they were called meshummadim, that is to say, they converted under violent duress. Now, even when they convert willingly, the name has remained.”⁴ By contrast, the terms for converts from Judaism in the world of Islam, widely used in geniza material, derives from the root *pasha* (sin) in Hebrew.⁵

Neither members of the Jewish community nor fully excised from it, converts continued to play a significant role both in the imaginative life of the community as well as in its routine activities. Historian Jacob Katz included “the apostate” as one of the significant typological figures of the medieval Jewish community, albeit one who existed on the margins. A filter through which Jews and Christians mediated their images of one another, converts were the first to negotiate the increasingly rigid boundaries between these cultures and communities.

Early Literary Paradigms

The emergence of the convert to Christianity as an archetype of malevolence within medieval Ashkenazic culture can be traced to early medieval literary sources, including historical or quasi-historical narratives, chronicles, halakhic literature, and liturgical passages. Each of these records speaks in a different tone and context, each genre operating within a specific framework with different ground rules. Yet, they reflect existing attitudes and left their imprint on the historical consciousness of Ashkenazic Jews. These texts provide the historical or myth/historical grounding without which the communal, religious, and psychological dimensions remain inadequate for understanding conversion in early modern German lands.⁶

The Chronicle of Le Mans

One of the oldest European Jewish texts to transmit an image of a convert to Christianity is the late tenth-century *Chronicle of Le Mans*.⁷ In this narrative, an apostate from Judaism alleged that Jews, motivated by a compulsion to replay their crime against Jesus, attempted to harm their local count. The apostate then dangled the prospect before the count that once he eliminated the Jews, their property remained to be expropriated. While the author of the chronicle remains anonymous and the apostate eponymous, many of the characteristics of this apostate recurred in later depictions of converts.⁸ The text introduced the convert as an “offshoot of evil, of the root of the serpent,” a reference to the notion that apostates were born with tainted souls, inherently evil, never really part of the Jewish community. Nevertheless, even after the apostate in the narrative had committed his first evil deeds, the author commented on the apostate’s potential to revert to Judaism.⁹ The tension between the fixity and fluidity of their identity characterized depictions of apostates.

This chronicle depicted the apostate, like his successors, as motivated solely by opportunism and petty personal grievances, turning a personal vendetta against one Jew into implacable hatred of the entire people. The name, “Sehok ben Esther,” linked this text to the Purim story in the Book of Esther.¹⁰ If there was any question regarding the symbolic identity of the apostate, references to him as *tsar*, *oyev* (foe, enemy), terms reserved in the Book of Esther for Haman, leave no doubt. In this narrative, the apostate played the role that had traditionally been reserved for the greatest foe of the Jews, while the count played the secondary role of King of Persia, a willing dupe in the hands of a conniving villain.¹¹

In this early characterization we can already trace the transference onto a more vulnerable figure of Jewish anger against Christian rulers who controlled the Jewish fate completely. Jews imposed severe self-censorship on direct expressions of anger and betrayal. They could not afford to provoke Christian rulers who failed to maintain their explicit or implied promises of safety and security, because any negative expression could later be used as evidence that Jews harbored ill will toward their Christian protectors. In a process that developed over centuries and culminated in Josel of Rosheim’s sixteenth-century *Sefer ha-miknah*, converts became secondary targets of Jewish anger.

In another adumbration of the image and role of apostates, the villain in *The Chronicle of Le Mans* led Christians into the Jewish inner sanctum, claiming the unique role of revealing to Christians the secret Jewish spaces which he had already penetrated as a Jew. The apostate did not confine himself to one spe-

cific and easily refutable charge (concerning an effigy); he “revealed” that the seemingly innocent Jewish daily worship service was permeated by expressions of desire to harm Christians.¹² The apostate translated the popular Christian belief that Jews hated Jesus into Jewish hatred of all Christian authorities. This text reflected many of the *topoi* associated with the figure of a convert at the time it was written.

If this chronicle does in fact date back to the late tenth century, it can explain the tension concerning the status of converts that escalated in the course of the eleventh. According to historian of early Ashkenaz Avraham Grossman, “The number of Jews who converted to Christianity in that time [the eleventh century] is far greater than has generally been accepted by scholars.”¹³ These include Jews who converted because they were persuaded by Christian missionary activity or because they were attracted to Christian society for the whole gamut of reasons that inspired such crossing of boundaries. Grossman argues that, far from being a peripheral problem, conversion to Christianity was one of the most significant issues to face Jewish communities in pre-Crusade Northern Europe.

In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, Jews were coerced into baptism during the course of several violent anti-Jewish attacks.¹⁴ Several of the most eminent families in Ashkenaz suffered such baptisms within their ranks, most notably the son of R. Gershom, “Light of the Exile” of Mainz, and possibly Elhanan, son of R. Shimon of the noted Abun family.¹⁵ The ambiguous status assigned to these forced converts to Christianity in early eleventh-century sources is noteworthy, and may reflect the existence of willing converts, some of whom turned into malevolent apostates.

Concerning the coerced baptism of R. Gershom’s son, later sources preserve a testimony “that R. Gershom mourned for his son fourteen days [double the usual mourning period of seven days], as he had been baptized.”¹⁶ While this source implied that the forced conversion was what prompted the double period of mourning, it was understood differently by thirteenth-century rabbinic luminary R. Meir of Rothenburg. He discussed whether Jewish law mandated mourning the death of a child who had turned apostate: “There is no obligation to mourn an apostate who dies. . . . Even though R. Gershom mourned his son when he died for fourteen days, the law does not follow him, as he acted out of overwhelming grief.”¹⁷ Grossman conjectured that the son of R. Gershom apparently died or was killed shortly after the incident and did not have a chance to revert to Judaism. If this were so, the story could serve as an example of a popular perception in Ashkenaz that the taint of baptism overpowered all considerations of intention, contrary to the position of halakhic sources. It is R. Gershom to whom Rashi, towering scholar and communal leader of the late eleventh century,

attributed the prohibition against reminding reverted apostates of their prior status, “for whoever shall remind a person [that he had been baptized] should be subject to perpetual excommunication.”¹⁸ The vehemence of this prohibition implies that it was directed against contrary popular opinion in the community. The controversy over whether a *kohen* (man of priestly descent) who had become a Christian retained his priestly status when he reverted to Judaism similarly addressed the question of the potency of baptism, the pollution of the baptismal font, and the price of having lived as a Christian.¹⁹

Concerning the child from the Abun family, according to one tradition, he was kidnapped from his parental home as a small child and baptized. He later became a priest and rose through the ranks until he became pope. Toward the end of his life, he met his Jewish father, and in a dramatic denouement, repented and died a martyr.²⁰ Stories with these motifs reflect the Jewish fear of child baptisms against parental will, the conviction that baptized Jews became enemies of their own people, the fantasy that these souls might ultimately return, and the profound belief that martyrdom was the only appropriate response to coerced Christianity.²¹ These early sources laid the foundations for Jewish attitudes to both forced and willing converts in the shattering events that later engulfed the Jews of Ashkenaz.

Consolidation of a Discourse: The Crusade Chronicles

While it is difficult to determine on the basis of extant sources just how central a role the issue of conversion played for Jews of Europe during the eleventh century, the First Crusade in 1096 changed all that. During the eleventh century, one of rapid growth and change for northwestern Europe, Christian identity, piety, and consciousness intensified. The status of Jews, now the only conspicuous community of non-Christians living in medieval western Europe, changed decisively during the eleventh century. As the boundaries between the religious communities became more sharply delineated, the price of trying to negotiate them grew proportionately. Religious tensions erupted in violent attacks against Jews in some of the cities visited by Crusader bands. Confronted with the choice between baptism and death, many Jews chose death. Whether or not the Crusades can be considered a watershed in Jewish-Christian relations in Europe, they were certainly more deeply inscribed in the collective memory of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry than any other instance of persecution.²² Long after living memory of the events had faded, chronicles, elegies, memorial prayers, *Memorbücher*, and even tombstones perpetuated the memory of these events and served as a powerful internal polemic against baptism into Christianity even under extreme duress.²³

The Hebrew Crusade chronicles presented martyrdom as the ideal response to the threat of coerced baptism by the Crusaders. At first glance, the texts appear to convey a conflicting message concerning forced baptism. The chroniclers did not conceal the fact that Jews did not universally respond to the Crusaders with martyrdom. The longest of the chronicles, attributed to Shlomo bar Shimshon, contains several prominent references to Jews baptized by the Crusaders. For example, after recording the experience of some eight hundred martyrs in the city of Worms, the chronicler reported: "They left only a tiny remnant, whom they coerced and baptized against their will, with their putrid waters."²⁴ Similarly, in a report concerning the town of Moers: "Those who survived were putrified against their will, and they had their way with them."²⁵ The entire Jewish community of Regensburg was baptized, apparently at the initiative of the local burghers, who used this as a ruse to save their Jewish co-residents. After the Crusaders had passed, "they [the baptized Jews] returned immediately to the Lord . . . and greatly repented. For what they had done they had done under great duress. They could not stand up against the enemy and indeed the enemy did not wish to kill them. May our Rock forgive us our shortcomings."²⁶ The chronicle depicts the Jews who survived performing the greatest acts of compassion toward their martyred fellows. "The Hebrews who had been coerced came and took pity on them and wanted to bury them."²⁷ This chronicle even contains a passage defending the forced converts:

Now it is fitting to tell the praise of those forcibly converted. In all that they ate and drank they mortally endangered themselves. They slaughtered meat and removed the forbidden fat from it. They examined the meat according to rabbinic law. They did not drink *ḡayn nesekh*. They did not go to church except under duress. Every time they went, they went out of great compulsion and fear. They went reluctantly. The gentiles themselves knew that they had not converted wholeheartedly, but only out of fear of the Crusaders, and that they did not believe in their deity, but rather they clung to the fear of the Lord and held fast to the sublime God, creator of heaven and earth. In the sight of the gentiles they observed the sabbath properly and observed the Torah of the Lord secretly. Anyone who speaks ill of them insults the countenance of the Divine Presence.²⁸

The concluding passage betrays traces of resistance to portraying the baptized in a favorable light. The survivors who had not been baptized, or relatives of the martyrs, may have objected to the *anusim* (coerced converts) and argued that they should not be reintegrated into the Jewish community without penalty. Halakhic sources indicate that surviving Jews raised questions about the status of

the converts. The vehemence of this chronicle in defense of baptized Jews raises the question of whether its creator(s) might not have been among the baptized as well.²⁹

The need for justification and the positive portrayal of the figure of converts in Ashkenaz points to an existing, and contrary, literary and cultural tradition. Earlier persecutions in which Jews were forcibly baptized in Ashkenaz, including members of the several distinguished families mentioned above, left ambiguous traces concerning the status of those who converted under duress. The teachings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz that emerged in the thirteenth century concerning the indelibility of baptism as a stain upon the Jewish soul for all generations, may have been circulating among the affected communities.

Even after taking into account every single positive reference to the baptized Jews who survived the Crusades, the overwhelming burden of all three Hebrew chronicles conveys the opposite message. The authors of these chronicles wrote with the intention of strengthening the resolve of the surviving Jews. Each act of martyrdom demonstrated how to resist baptism, albeit insincere and under pain of death. Valorizing the examples of those who preferred martyrdom to coerced baptism would empower others faced with the same choice to resist the great pressure to convert. The image of benevolent marranism did not survive within Ashkenazic popular tradition. Despite overwhelming halakhic support for the untainted Jewish status of forced converts in Ashkenaz, it did not become an acceptable communal response to this form of persecution.³⁰

A story preserved in *Sefer Hasidim* illustrates the willful obliteration of the memory of forced baptism among some Jews, so that their actions would not set an undesirable precedent. "During the time of forced conversions, a bishop sent a Jew to the neighboring town, where the Jews had been forcibly converted by the bishop. The bishop said, 'Whatever they did, you Jews will follow.' The man reported [falsely] that all those Jews had died for the sake of the Divine Name."³¹

In another story from the same source, the taint of baptism erupted even in later generations, to corrupt the descendants of the bearers. "There were two brothers who were apostates. The sage investigated their ancestors to learn what had brought this about. When the catastrophe struck, the Jewish community had said: 'What shall we do?' The rabbi had replied: 'Watch me and do the same.' He took a cross and carried it so that the Christians would not kill him. They forcibly converted him along with the other Jews of his town. Therefore his descendants had apostatized."³²

The martyrs sacrificed their lives and suffered horrible torments in order to avoid being contaminated by baptismal waters. Their fear that their children would be removed and reared as Christians motivated them to commit unprece-

dedicated acts, opening a new chapter in the history of Jewish martyrdom.³³ Their revulsion goes beyond even the most exacting halakhic demands. The instinctual and profound repudiation of baptism led some of the baptized Jews to commit suicide after the Crusaders had left, to kill other Jews, and to take the lives of their own children, acts of radical defiance nowhere mandated by Jewish law; yet the chroniclers characterized these as the ideal responses.³⁴

The Hebrew Crusade chronicles link the image of baptism with the language of violence and of personal violation. In the eyes of the Hebrew chroniclers, the actions of the Crusaders issued more out of a desire to annihilate the Jewish spirit than to foster the growth of the Christian. The first mention of baptism in the chronicle, placed in the mouth of the Crusaders, equated it with physical annihilation: "Let us annihilate them as a people, so that the name of Israel will be obliterated, or let them become as we are and accept the son of lust."³⁵ The image of baptism that was transmitted from the Jewish experience of the Crusades constituted a complete capitulation to the forces of manifest untruth and impurity.

While the chronicles did not link every anti-Christian invective to baptism, they expressed every mention of baptism in the most denigrating terms, most often as being "befouled by putrid waters."³⁶ Derogatory terms such as *tzachanah* (stench) often sufficed to designate baptism. In summarizing the entire anti-Christian polemic in these phrases, the invectives "functioned as an arsenal for the Jews in their resistance to the ceaseless attempts made by Christians to convert them." Anna Abulafia characterized the chronicle literature as a concise means of transmitting the lessons of the *Toledot Yeshu*, an ancient Jewish polemical counter-history to the New Testament.³⁷ This polemic educated Jews to abhor the sacred symbols of the Christian religion. The *Toledot Yeshu*, however, contained no instances of confrontations which Jews could readily apply to contemporary circumstances. The chronicles provided historical exempla of how to reject Christianity when the opportunity arose.

Other Crusade literature described the religion rejected by the martyrs not only as false, but as a form of sexual defilement. A *kinah* (dirge) for the Crusade martyrs referred to baptismal waters as *mayim ha-me'arerim*, the biblical term for waters used to test the faithfulness of a straying wife.³⁸ R. Ephraim of Bonn's *Sefer zekhirah*, a chronicle of the Second Crusade, depicts one pious Jewess and her three daughters coerced and baptized in the *mayim ha-marim ha-mea'rerim*, a striking metaphor for baptism as conjugal violation, and resistance as proof of the connubial faithfulness of Jews to their God. The extreme repudiation of baptism was nourished by a metaphor of conjugal fidelity between Jews and their God; baptism represented an irreversible violation of that relationship.³⁹ Against such

extreme expressions of rejection, a benign image of well-meaning and penitent survivors could not prevail.

The actions of the martyrs were meant to stand as eternal testimony to the power of the one faith against the other. By accepting dreadful deaths rather than abandoning their ancestral beliefs, the martyrs proved the perfection of the Jewish faith to the world. Individuals who failed the test of faith by accepting baptism undermined the truth claim of Judaism, and for that there could be no atonement. These texts transformed even coerced baptism into a mortal sin against the collective ideal in Ashkenaz. Conversion to Christianity, regardless of the impetus, became firmly associated with physical violence, sexual degradation, and spiritual annihilation. Even the weakest Jews, women and children, were expected to put up the ultimate resistance to such attempts to eradicate their Jewishness.

The Hesitating Will

Stories of martyrdom in medieval Ashkenaz often told of heroic resistance and rejection of conversion to Christianity. The story of Rabbi Amnon, linked to a most stirring prayer of the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) services, “U-netane tokef,” became deeply embedded in medieval Jewish consciousness. The moving tale of martyrdom was first preserved in a thirteenth-century text, which attributed it to a twelfth-century author.⁴⁰ As historian Ivan Marcus has noted, the story differed from other tales of martyrdom feeding into the collective store of Ashkenazic memory because its subject, R. Amnon, appeared to hesitate over the question of conversion. Rabbi Amnon then expiated for creating the appearance of doubt by choosing and enduring a terrible martyr’s death. In Marcus’s view, the narrative was the first to interpret the request for a waiting period as a possible sign of an individual Jew’s ambivalence toward conversion. Significantly, the story transferred “the agent of the sin from Gentile oppressor to the hesitating will of the Jew himself.”⁴¹ This subtle shift would eventually come into full flower in the course of the medieval centuries. The burden of blame would come to rest with the Jew who succumbed, rather than on the Christian who pressured him.

An Ashkenazic halakhic manuscript written in the fourteenth or fifteenth century preserved another tale of the hesitating will of an otherwise learned and pious Jew. The protagonist, a member of the Jewish elite of pre-expulsion London, resolved his dilemma in an equally tragic way.

An event which occurred in England: there was an experienced scholar, very wealthy, who studied in the yeshivah, named R. Yom Tov, *z"l* (the

memory of the righteous is a blessing.) On the eve of *Shavu'ot*, he took his hook and he hanged himself. His father, R. Moshe Hasid (the Pious) did not leave his room and did not shed a tear. He studied in the *midrash* (study hall) as though nothing bad had happened, for he said that his son had inflicted it upon himself. . . . Only servants and simpletons were occupied with him [prepared him for burial] and we did not touch him. Very few scholars carried his coffin, together with the servants, and they transported him by carriage to the city of London, to the area of the cemetery; the rabbi and the members of the yeshivah walked behind his coffin.

That night, he came to me in a dream, and I saw him, more handsome than in life. He appeared to many that night; he had come to the Great Light; he was completely sure that he would enter that world immediately. The master, *zt"l*, also saw what he saw, and on the eighth of *Sivan* in London, he eulogized him greatly, for that young man was a pious and Godfearing man; in all the communities I have not seen his like. . . . It subsequently became clear that he had judged himself harshly. Something of a *shed* (evil spirit) had dwelled within him . . . He said that the evil spirit had appeared before him like a warp and woof [term used to signify the crucifix] and had pressured him to worship idolatry.⁴²

In this instance, the temptation to convert arose within the mind of the Jew R. Yom Tov in the absence of any external pressure, or at least without memory of such pressure. Only death provided full peace and absolution. Later literary material continued to present the drama of a communal Jewish struggle for each soul tempted to Christianity, although some stories had happier endings.⁴³

Unbroken Spirit

The late thirteenth century provided another drama which soon entered Ashkenazic historical memory. In it, an apostate's betrayal of R. Meir of Rothenburg, a revered Jewish leader, obscured the role of the royal Christian malefactor. R. Meir, the foremost halakhist and communal leader of his age, personified the tragic and heroic posture of medieval German Jewry.⁴⁴ The betrayal of this beloved leader symbolized the treachery of malicious apostates faced by the Jews of Ashkenaz.

In the summer of 1286, R. Meir left Rothenburg with his entire family, joining a party of other Jews, apparently bound for the Holy Land. When he stopped in the mountainous region of Lombardy to await fellow emigrants, Imperial forces arrested and imprisoned him. The story of his incarceration by Emperor

Rudolph I of Habsburg and the refusal of the emperor to release even his remains for burial came to symbolize the tormented relationship between the Jews of the Empire and the Christian authorities. All contemporary sources indicate that the arrest and detention of R. Meir resulted from direct intervention by the emperor, possibly in order to discourage further Jewish emigration from German lands. The annalist of Colmar for the year 1287 reported that “the Rotweiler Jew . . . *had been taken by King Rudolph.*”⁴⁵ This source, and another one recorded shortly after the events, attributed the capture of R. Meir directly to Rudolph. No intermediate agent is mentioned. Throughout Jewish retellings of the story, in the transmission cluster which we can designate as Sephardic, Rudolph remained the direct agent of R. Meir’s travails.

German-Jewish sources, however, offer a completely different tradition concerning the circumstances of R. Meir’s capture. According to the version preserved in the early sixteenth-century Minhag Book of Worms, an apostate (named Knippe or Kinpe) recognized R. Meir and informed a bishop of his presence. The bishop then ordered the arrest.⁴⁶ Juzpa Shammash, seventeenth-century compiler of the customs of Worms, cited another version of the story in his book of miracle tales, *Ma’aseh Nissim*, apparently as he heard it told among the Jews of Worms: “One informer, who was an apostate, (*mosser ehad meshummad*) informed against him before the Roman King. The *mosser* (informer) advised the king to watch carefully when MaHaRa”M [R. Meir] passed through his land on his way, in order to invent a libel against him and to imprison him. . . . The king believed the meshummad (apostate) and ordered the citizens to ambush R. Meir as he passed, and to bring him before the king.”⁴⁷

This seventeenth-century version of the story magnifies the role of the informer-apostate. It contains no mention of a bishop; the emperor plays an almost passive role following the advice of the apostate. Moreover, it softens the role of the emperor. “The king honored [R. Meir] greatly in prison, and permitted him to bring all his books so that he could study Torah whenever he wished.” Although this version further recounted that the king allowed R. Meir to languish in prison until his death seven years later, and forbade the release of his body for burial for another fourteen years, it does not express, in word or tone, opprobrium against Rudolph and his cruelty toward the man of God. This account of R. Meir in the Worms collection of Yuzpa circulated broadly.

Of course, while not every incident left its mark on literature, some episodes involving the malefaction of apostates did not fail to leave a deep imprint on German Jewry. In 1474, the elderly R. Israel Bruna, then rabbi in Regensburg and foremost halakhic decisor in German lands, was arrested on charges of ritual

murder. Although the accuser, a converted Jewish thief named Hans Veyol, later recanted, the imprisonment of R. Israel sent shock waves throughout German Jewry.⁴⁸

The Sixteenth Century: Josel of Rosheim

Josel of Rosheim, sixteenth-century intercessor for German Jews at the Imperial Court, developed most fully the Ashkenazic tendency to magnify the malevolent image of the convert, and thereby minimize the injustice perpetrated by a Christian king. In the early sixteenth century, converts from Judaism became particularly prominent in German lands. Three of them, Victor von Carben, Johannes Pfefferkorn, and Antonius Margaritha, rose to great public renown by using the power of printing to threaten the tenuous existence of Jewish communities in German lands. To counter their newly found voice and power, Josel of Rosheim's *Sefer ha-miknah* articulated the sharpest and most ramified denunciation of converts written by any Jew. This unique chronicle focused on the role of informers and apostates as the driving force behind the calamities that befell German-Jewish communities.⁴⁹ Josel linked an informer-turned-apostate to each Jewish disaster. In each chapter, an apostate committed an act of treachery, some form of *mesirah* (informing), while the traitor was still a Jew. This betrayal of communal solidarity served as an inevitable first step towards apostasy, complete severance from the House of Israel.

Josel's chronicle provides a conspicuous example of how apostates came to play the role of the darkest alter ego in Jewish perceptions of calamity. It transfigured the traditional formula, "Due to our sins we have been exiled," into "Due to *their* treachery, we have suffered." Josel attributed the suffering of Jewry in exile to the malefaction of its own worst sons. In *Sefer ha-miknah's* account of Jewish experience, apostates played a preeminent role. Josel's projection of malevolent agency onto converts, rather than direct attack on the primary aggressors, represents the culmination of a trend that began with the first medieval Jewish narratives in which converts played a role.

The self-perception of Ashkenazic Jewry as a pure and holy community nourished Josel's historical world view. At the apex of the ideal community stood individuals such as Josel, who devoted their lives and resources to protecting the Jewish community. *Sefer ha-miknah* served as his attempt to reconcile this ideal image with historical and personal experience of a different order. The grim reality was that German Jewry of Josel's day contained individuals who were weak, selfish, or criminal, who would endanger the welfare of an entire community for the sake of power, money, or revenge. The mystical perfection of the community with its paragons of devoted service found their absolute antithesis in its traitors, ren-

dered on a mythic scale, as the embodiment of evil: “Their nourishment is from the filth of the primordial serpent, which has reached Esau, Eliphaz, and their offspring, Amalek and Haman . . . there is nothing so vile in the eyes of God as the class of *mosrim* (informers) for they are accursed.”⁵⁰ Josel blurred the distinction between *mosrim* (informers), *meshummadim* (apostates), and *minim* (heretics), to indicate that they were all part of a single phenomenological continuum, the dark forces in an epic struggle within Jewish society throughout history.

Josel elevated his belief that Jewish informers would inevitably convert to Christianity to the level of doctrine. “In each generation thorns and brambles have sprouted up; they have caused Israel to falter in their exile and have maligne (*hilshinu*) in order to deliver the people of God to their death. Most have gone onto the evil path and apostatized publicly; it is a tradition from our scribes: Whoever has been tainted by the impure spirit and become involved in *mesirah* (informing), either he or his descendants will end up in apostasy.”⁵¹ Josel cited numerous examples of the trajectory that led directly from betrayal of the community to apostasy. This was the destiny of tainted souls, from which even an illustrious pedigree could not shield them. If it were not fulfilled immediately, this preordained fate would eventually find fulfillment in a later generation; if the marked person did not convert, his children would.

Josel’s systematic application of an archetypal function of the apostate to the entire course of Jewish history remains unique in its consistency. His elevation of apostates to the status of primary hostile “Other” deflected the ultimate responsibility for oppression of Jews from the highest power in the land to internal malefactors. By using the apostates as a foil and counterimage to the benign Imperial image, Josel added new contours to the figure of the apostate as a topology in sixteenth-century Ashkenazic historical writing.⁵²

Josel’s relegation of willing apostates to the darkest regions of the Jewish historiographical imagination formed an extension of the tendency in Ashkenazic literature to reject the notion of baptism under duress as a strategy for survival. Chronicles, as well as other sources, affirm that German Jews obdurately withstood the temptation to submit to baptism whenever that choice provided a way out of hideous death, in the wake of the Black Plague and through other anti-Jewish depredations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁵³

Ashkenazic sources deemphasized or omitted the fact that some individual Ashkenazic Jews chose baptism rather than death. When educating Ashkenazic Jews about the history of Iberian Jewry, for example, editors excised references to a communal strategy that chose conversion and survival over martyrdom. Translators into Yiddish of the *Shevet Yehudah*, a chronicle which detailed many instances of mass conversion among Sephardic Jews, omitted entire chapters and all

references to these events. They simply obliterated the memory before it reached Ashkenazic readers.⁵⁴

Menahem Amelander's Yiddish chronicle elaborated on the image of Ashkenazic preference for martyrdom over coerced conversion. "Many daughters have acted with valor, but you have exceeded them all.' This is a parable to the Jews. Although many communities suffered terrible persecutions for His Name's sake, and did not wish to apostatize, they could not withstand the trial. But the communities of Ashkenaz [German lands], Bohemia, Moravia, and Hungary which suffered more than all the others, nevertheless persisted in their religion and their Torah."⁵⁵ He concluded his chapter on the persecutions of German Jews in the wake of the Black Plague and the charges of well poisoning: "The scribes have written that there has been no suffering like that of the Jews in Ashkenaz since heaven and earth were created. Nevertheless . . . they stood firm and did not apostatize, Heaven forbid, but died to sanctify his Name."⁵⁶

Apostates in Medieval Jewish Law

While Jewish literary texts, and even some converts from Judaism, created the impression that conversion initiated a rupture so extreme that their former co-religionists cut off ties and spurned them absolutely, the reality in most cases diverged from this ideal. The converts' patent motive for their depiction of the severance as final and complete was their need to appeal to Christian charity. Orphaned from the community that had nurtured them, they appealed for financial support as well as social acceptance to their adoptive community. Every party to the ideal vision of a reborn convert had practical and ideological motives for maintaining the notion of a complete split, but it cannot be sustained as the historical truth governing the relationship between the convert, his former community, and his new one. There were many areas of congruence and continuity between the converts and the Jewish community, as their considerable place in Jewish legal sources testifies.

Attitudes toward apostates evolved slowly in Jewish law, reflecting the tension between cutting off the traitor root and branch and affirming the immutability of Jewishness.⁵⁷ Converts from the Jewish community had forged many ties, such as marriage and kinship, business and inheritance, which survived long beyond the formal act of baptism. The persistent, if ambivalent, claim of the Jewish community concerning the ultimate spiritual identity of the convert strengthened these bonds.

Talmudic tradition recognized only the sin of aggravated heresy; it comprehended no category of total renunciation of Jewishness. The Talmud used the Hebrew terms *mumar* and *meshummad* almost interchangeably to designate apos-

tates, while it distinguished between limited apostasy, habitual transgressions of a particular nature, and a more comprehensive apostasy which entailed rejection of the entire Torah. In both instances, the person retained his basic status as a Jew, providing the underpinnings for the notion of Jewish immutability. During the medieval period, exclusivist claims of Christianity increased the consequences of leaving the fold. The terms that medieval halakhists inherited from talmudic and geonic sources, which developed primarily in pagan and Muslim societies, could not begin to encompass the intense rivalry and the heightened consequences of abandoning Judaism within medieval Christendom. Concerning the Jewish status of apostates, Geonic sources drew a line between matters of inheritance, where they deemed the bond of kinship to have been broken by the apostasy, and matters of personal status, such as divorce and levirate marriage.⁵⁸ In the latter instances, they tended to regard the apostate as still fully Jewish.

The debate among Sephardic halakhists over the status of *conversos* and *Marranos* in Iberia stimulated the production of a rich *responsa* literature.⁵⁹ The dimensions of the Iberian conversion phenomenon differed fundamentally from those in Ashkenaz, which never experienced a parallel mass conversion. Conversion in medieval Ashkenaz remained essentially an individual phenomenon until the nineteenth century. The *responsa* literature of medieval Ashkenaz abounds in examples of the interaction between apostates and the Jewish community. Mid-twelfth-century French Jewish leader R. Jacob Tam reported that more than twenty *gittin* (writs of divorce) were written in Paris, in France, as well as in German lands, for converts who had apparently left their Jewish wives behind. Grossman argues persuasively that this represents only a fraction of the actual number of converts.⁶⁰ R. Tam's report indicated that these conversions affected very respectable families within the communities. Members of those families would need to interact with the converts in a variety of ways.

Most *responsa* deal with cases of male apostates, not necessarily because there were many fewer instances of female conversion, but because male conversion triggered greater halakhic problems. If a woman left the fold, her husband could be halakhically freed to marry another. If a man converted, Jewish law still required that he grant his wife a Jewish divorce to enable her to remarry.⁶¹ This paradox in Jewish law, which treated the apostate as one whose soul was cut off, and whose family observed mourning rituals, yet still regarded him as legally married under Jewish law to his Jewish wife, became the subject of derision by some apostates. Once the husband left the Jewish community, the standard communal pressures no longer served to effect the release of his wife. The only communal recourses, attempts to bribe the husband or to extract divorce in a moment of compassion and guilt for the eternal predicament of his wife, fell either to

family members or to representatives of the local Jewish community. While this problem occurred throughout the medieval Jewish world, it was best represented in Ashkenazic halakhic literature.⁶²

Later literature shows that the pattern of male conversion and female resistance was the dominant pattern for married couples. Medieval responsa do not reflect the many instances in which unwilling women converted knowing that they had no marital future in the Jewish community, and that they would usually lose their children as well.⁶³ If a man died childless, his wife could not remarry without *halitzah*, the ritual to free her from the obligation of levirate marriage. If the surviving brother had converted, her marital fate lay in his power.⁶⁴ Another frequent question that arose in rabbinic responsa concerned the status of the apostate's estate and his eligibility to inherit from Jewish relatives.⁶⁵ Conflicting claims often took years to litigate and kept Jewish and Christian judiciaries entangled with one another for the duration.

Many responsa attest to other reasons for contacts with apostates. In the fifteenth century, a young Jewish man, Loewe of Passau, took an oath not to gamble with any Jew. He later asked R. Isserlein if he was permitted to play with a certain apostate in Neustadt, as the law did not consider an apostate to be a Jew.⁶⁶ Other questions regarding casual social contact abounded. Was an apostate regarded as a Jew or a non-Jew when it came to the prohibition against Jews charging one another interest?⁶⁷ Was the wine left in the charge of an apostate considered kosher, or was it *ayin nesekh* (wine prepared by Gentiles) and forbidden to Jews to drink?⁶⁸ Might an apostate act as a *Shabbos goy*, doing things for Jews on the Sabbath that they were not permitted to do themselves?⁶⁹ Was one permitted to sell meat which had become unkosher to an apostate? Might a Jew accept charity from an apostate?⁷⁰ These many discussions with their varied responses betrayed the deep tension in Jewish law and society between affirmation of the immutable character of Jewishness irrespective of baptism and the desire to welcome back penitents against the need to impose harsh penalties to prevent further conversions.

Liturgy

Literature and law were not the only vehicles which fixed images of apostates in medieval Jewish consciousness. Unlike Jewish prayers which asked for the destruction of idolators, enemies of God, and arrogant kingdoms, which Christian polemicists construed as intentionally anti-Christian, Jewish daily prayers included one invocation specifically aimed at informers (*ve-la-malshinim*) and apostates (*ve-la-meshummadim*): "May the informers or/ apostates have no hope." Introduced to ostracize heretics, including early Christians of Jewish extraction, the

Item Sy haben zwai sunderlicher gebet wider vns cri-
stendie lauten in yr hebraischer sprach al;ö

Felamschomodim al tehy dikfa vechol hamí
 המ וכל תקוה תהיאל ול משומרים
 nim kerega jouedu vechol oyse amcho
 עמר אוילכל וכל יאברו כרגע ליגים
 bef jrael mehera ykoreson vmalchus
 ו מלכות יכרהתון מהרה לשדאל בליה
 sodon mehera teacker vshaber vffmager
 ותמגר ותשיבד העקר מהרה זרזון
 fesachnia kol oyfenu bymhera beyomenu
 בלימנו ובמהרה אוילכלנו כל ותבגלע

Fig. 1. Hebrew prayer against converts, “Felamschomodim,” with transliteration,
 from Johannes Pfefferkorn, *Ich bin ein buchlein* (Augsburg, 1509).

Reproduced courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

paragraph was imbued with new meaning throughout the medieval period. Some recensions of the prayer from Muslim lands specified Christians as the “informers and apostates.” When medieval European Jews uttered these imprecations, they may certainly have understood them to refer to apostates to Christianity. Although different recensions of this prayer abounded, censors or internal censorship often forced its revision or excision.⁷¹

Converts from Judaism delighted in adducing this passage to prove the undying Jewish enmity for Christians in general and for new converts in particular. Spanish convert Nicholas Donin introduced the text to a wide audience when he cited it as proof that Jews cursed the church, the king, and all Christians daily in their synagogues. Early sixteenth-century convert Victor von Carben wrote that “Jews who go over to Christianity (which they believe to be the worst religion in the whole world) are cursed twice daily in their [Jewish] prayers, day and night, in Hebrew. The prayer goes as follows: ‘Lameschommodim all thehi thykfo.’” He translated *meshummadim* as “verdilgten und verwüsten,” destroyed and annihilated.⁷² Convert Johannes Pfefferkorn cited this prayer to convince Emperor Maximilian to confiscate and destroy Hebrew books.⁷³

Eminent German humanist Johannes Reuchlin rebutted this argument forcefully in his “Opinion concerning the Question of Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn all Jewish Books.”⁷⁴ Reuchlin asked, “On what basis do the Christians wish to destroy the Talmud which they do not understand? I will provide a small example. Recently, a pamphlet against the Jews was printed [Pfefferkorn’s] wherein a prayer is cited which is embedded in their prayerbook. . . . It begins: “וּלְמַשׁוּמָדִים ve-la-meshummadim” (and for the apostates). It is greatly held against them, as though they intended by it to maliciously and venomously curse the apostles and their baptized successors, the entire Christian church, and the Roman Empire.” Reuchlin remonstrated that the word *meshummad* meant neither baptized, nor apostle, nor Christians, nor the Roman Empire, but “the destroyed”; in his reading the prayer meant: “May those who pray for our destruction be themselves destroyed.”⁷⁵ Reuchlin’s defense notwithstanding, converts continued to posit that Jews directed this prayer against them. Convert Antonius Margaritha translated it, “and all those who adhere to another religion should be destroyed instantly,” while convert Paul Kirchner simply translated *meshummadim* as “baptized Jews.”⁷⁶ By the late medieval period, the original intent of the framers of the liturgy becomes irrelevant. The question of what came first, the intention of the Jews or the accusation of the apostates, was rendered moot. By the sixteenth century this passage certainly served to remind German Jews of the apostates in their midst.

Penitent Apostates

A fair percentage of converts could not make the radical adjustments necessary to succeed in their new faith communities and returned to their communities of origin. Penitent apostates form a separate chapter in the history of converts.⁷⁷ In addition to voluntary converts who simply regretted their decision, the many instances of forced conversion in Ashkenaz created situations in which Jews who had been baptized against their will sought to reenter the community once circumstances permitted. Because these penitents had failed to live up to the ideal of martyrdom in Ashkenaz, numerous responsa seek to ascertain whether penalties and degradations ought to be applied to them. In most cases, rabbis who may have deplored the acceptance of coerced baptism before the fact, advocated receiving the returning convert without penalty after the fact. As R. Meir of Rothenburg replied to a question concerning the status of coerced converts as witnesses:

The fact that the captives did not give their lives for their religion does not disqualify them as witnesses. Although a Jew is enjoined to choose death

rather than be forced to worship idols, should he violate this law he would not have become disqualified as a witness, although he would be guilty of having committed a sin. Moreover, according to the account given by the captives, they never actually embraced Christianity, but merely listened without comment to the priest's recitation of his senseless ritual in the presence of the Gentiles. Thus the captives never committed a sin; for a Jew is not enjoined to choose death rather than allow the Christians to deceive themselves into believing that they have converted them.⁷⁸

Despite vigorous efforts by halakhists (including R. Gershom in the eleventh century, Rashi in the twelfth, and R. Meir in the thirteenth) to sustain the Jewish status of repentant apostates, Jewish folk beliefs and traditions concerning the efficacy of baptism endured.⁷⁹ Returning apostates or forced converts were required to undergo various purification rites in order to rejoin the Jewish community. One striking medieval description of the ceremony comes from an Inquisition manual: "After this he is stripped of his garments and is sometimes bathed in warm water. The Jews then rub him energetically with sand over his entire body, but especially on his forehead, chest and arms, that is, on the places which during baptism received the holy chrism. Then they cut the nails of his hands and feet until they bleed. They shave his head, and afterwards put him in the waters of a flowing stream, and plunge his head in the water three times. After this immersion they recite. . . . This done, he emerges from the water, dons a new shirt and breeches, and all the attending Jews give him a name, which is usually the name he had before baptism."⁸⁰

These ritual forms of counter-baptism survived through the centuries. A fifteenth-century responsum asked whether it was permitted "for someone who had apostatized, and come to be purified [on the intermediate holiday] to be shaved in order to be immersed and enter the true faith . . . for he cannot perform many of the sacred rituals until he shaves and immerses."⁸¹ An eighteenth-century description by a converted Jew, intent on highlighting the revulsion of Jews to converts, bears a striking resemblance to the medieval rite. "Not only does the returning convert have to undergo difficult penances, as the rabbi assigns, which could include many and difficult fasts, but he also must immerse in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) in front of three rabbinical judges, and so to speak, allow himself to be baptized again (*wieder tauffen lassen*). He has to bear all manner of insults and pay mind to every detail, especially if he is unlearned."⁸² The persistence of these rituals reinforces the notion that medieval Jews in Ashkenaz attributed potency to baptism despite the fact that Jewish law did not recognize it.⁸³

Conversion as Threat to the Jewish Community

Jewish communities could not actively and overtly discourage conversion, but given the noxious image and harmful actions of many converts, we may ask whether threats of voluntary conversion affected the internal workings of the community. The possibility that a Jew might resort to conversion to escape severe sanctions or even retaliate for them had to be considered before each communal decision to apply such sanctions. Jews who violated communal consensus were subject to severe forms of *herem*. These bans of excommunication were sufficient to jeopardize an individual's life and livelihood, leaving a Jew facing a ban with no alternatives except humiliating acquiescence to communal standards or conversion out. Conversion thus remained an option for deeply disaffected Jews; in fact, nineteenth-century historian Heinrich Graetz posited that medieval Jewish apostasy was a reaction to the power of excommunication by medieval Jewish communities.⁸⁴ The seventeenth-century case of convert Moses Marcus, grandson of noted memoirist Glikl Hameln, serves as an illustration of the alienating power of the ban. The Jewish community excommunicated Moses' wealthy and powerful father, and he did not see his son for over ten years. Alienated and vulnerable, Moses converted to Christianity.⁸⁵

Threats of conversion sometimes came from the most desperate and powerless voices in the medieval Jewish community. Women in dire marital straits would sometimes threaten conversion to coerce their husbands to grant them a divorce decree: "Leah rebelled against her husband, A, the son of Mendel Kern. When warned that she might lose her *ketubbah* and the dowry and that she might be forced to wait many years for her divorce, she threatened, among other things, to go and live among the Gentiles. Since the women of Regensburg were always arrogant in their relations to their husbands and now are even more supercilious than ever, Leah should be dealt with in a manner that would serve as a warning to her haughty sisters."⁸⁶

Another medieval responsum concerned a woman who had adulterously conceived and borne a child while her husband was away. Her father asked the court whether she could be put to death for this. "When asked whether he had tried other means of controlling her, he answered that whenever he reproved her she threatened to apostatize altogether and pleaded that she was not the first woman who ever sinned."⁸⁷ The case of one Jewish woman provides a most enterprising twist on the use of conversion. Her husband refused to grant her a divorce, and the Jewish court refused to coerce him. The woman converted to Christianity, forcing the court to coerce her husband to issue the divorce. As soon as the court

began the proceedings, the woman reverted to Judaism. As soon as this happened, the husband retracted his assent. The rabbis ruled that the court must continue to coerce him “because of the likelihood that she would apostatize again if the divorce were not granted.”⁸⁸ While such an open shuttling between religions would have been impossible in most of medieval Christian Europe, the responsum attests to the perception in Jewish legal texts that this action threatened to rear its head as a last resort for people in desperate straits. A complex fifteenth-century responsum considered whether the principle “that Jewish women not leave the fold” could operate in cases where a Jewish woman needed a release from her husband who had apostatized.⁸⁹

The particular nature of divorce aside, Jewish communities continually faced the question of whether to temper their response to deviance from communal norms out of fear that harsh measures could push a person into apostasy. A seventeenth-century rabbinic responsum articulated precisely such a concern: “Concerning your query in which A deliberately imbibed *ḡayn nesekh* [Gentile-prepared wine], and the community wished to punish him by imposing a fine and issuing a proclamation about him. Their rabbinic leader deterred them from doing so, concerned that he would blaspheme even further, eat forbidden foods, and leave the faith, *yetzei chutz la-dat*, and the onus of the blame would fall on the congregation which drove him to that.”⁹⁰ In this particular instance R. Yair Hayim Bacharach replied that the community must not be swayed to bend its principles for fear of apostasy:

While it appears at first glance that the rabbi ruled correctly . . . if we heed this, God forbid, the evil ones will continue to do whatever they please. Even the judges will be concerned in the same manner, and truth will be trampled. The judgment of Maharam [R. Meir of Rothenberg] that we ease up on our struggle with the sinners, emanates from a concern for the safety of the [the Jewish community], not from concern for the ruin of the sinners . . . If a Jew has sinned in a manner that he is obligated to pay a fine or be whipped or excommunicated, we do not withhold anything out of fear that he will become incensed and sin even greater sins, [we do not] budge, God forbid, from the law and teachings of our Torah. . . . Moreover, whoever can eject such a *mumar*, one who denies the unity [of God] and defies the Creator, from [their community] has done a good deed and has done nothing contrary to our faith.⁹¹

Regardless of their actual numbers, apostates from Judaism remained a significant presence in medieval Ashkenazic communal life. So long as Jews lived within the

corporate structure of the *kehillah*, with the lines between the Jewish and Christian worlds rigidly delineated, the condition of most European Jews until the late eighteenth century, converts remained figures on the margin. They evoked the fear, mistrust, and enmity which Jews could not fully express against the hostile Other whose world they inhabited.