

Conclusions: The change in mentality

Jewish self-definition in medieval Europe was based upon classical Jewish values: first, the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people as the chosen people; second, an explicit Jewish identity deriving from the world of commandments unique to Judaism. As the Jewish group lived within Christian society, the essence of whose theological view was that Christians and Christianity had supplanted Jews and Judaism as God's chosen people and religion, the Jewish group made efforts to emphasize, in its own self-definition, the difference between itself and the society at large. As a result, one of the elements of the Jewish self-definition was its self-understanding as being 'non-Christian.' That is, it was not only the positive values that characterized the Jew as such that entered into the scale of values, the process of socialization, the ceremonies and prayers, but also the negation of that which was defined as its opposite. The Jew defined himself first and foremost as a Jew, and thereafter as a 'non-Christian.' The more successful was the Christian society, the more confident it was in itself and in emphasizing characteristic values derived from Christianity; the Jewish self-definition, in corresponding fashion, emphasizes its own values, defining them as explicitly Jewish and underscoring their difference from those of the surrounding Christian world. The Jewish self-definition was based upon a self-image as 'good,' 'pure,' 'innocent' (in the sense of 'whole' or 'complete'), but also upon such values as 'not evil like the Christian,' 'not impure like the Christian,' and so on; this same scale of values was likewise emphasized with regard to the religion and its symbols.¹ Since Christianity declared its desire to convert the Jew to Christianity by means of economic temptation, theological persuasion, and even by violent coercion, Jewish efforts concentrated upon intensive processes of socialization in order to protect itself against these attempts.² Thus, among all the

forms of (social) deviation, the most serious was that involved in conversion from one religion to another. For the Jewish group that lived within a Christian society that emphasized its religious superiority, its physical and theological victory, and its perception that, whatever might happen, in the final analysis the Jews would indeed accept the Christian truth, the conversion of an isolated individual was perceived as a theological disaster, an affront to morale and hope, and a constant threat.

With regard to mentality, the terminology used is of very great importance, as it influences both the popular perception and the individual's perception of the other. The popular folk perception tends to portray the convert to Christianity in somber or ridiculous light, thereby shaping and strengthening the self-definition that completely negates the act of deviance itself. Every negative term emphasizes the opposite of that term as being of value, superior, and special. Regarding those who converted to Christianity, the most basic term used was *meshumad*, or 'apostate,' a harsh term describing the convert to Christianity as one who had undergone a process of destruction (from the Hebrew root *shm'd*, destroy; see above, Chapter 1). Rashi, in describing the convert to Christianity, uses the term 'alien son, uncircumcised of heart' (Exodus 12:43; Ezekiel 44:9), explaining that 'his deeds are alien to his Father in Heaven, and they are uncircumcised of heart; it is one whether he is a Gentile or an apostate Jew.'³ Rashi, whose principled approach regarding the expectation that the apostate will recant underlies his halakhic understanding of the convert to Christianity, notes that by his deeds the apostate had destroyed his relationship with God and thereby lost his identity, which was close to God, in both a spiritual and a physical manner—something had happened to his heart. This is doubtless a reaction to the Christian view that sees one who has converted to Christianity as undergoing a 'change of heart'—a conversion. In the act of circumcision which a Jew undergoes at the age of eight days, a covenant, whose physical expression is in the removal of the foreskin, is made between the Jew and his God. The Jew who accepts Christianity has not undergone a 'change of heart,' as the Christians claim, but a process of sealing off or closing of his heart. The convert to Christianity takes the impure foreskin, removed from him at his Brit as a symbol of purification, and returns it to his heart. There is no conversion of the heart but, to the contrary, the convert to Christianity is now 'uncircumcised of heart'; his heart is closed, impure.

The self-characterization of the Jew in the Middle Ages as 'pure' and 'righteous' is in stark contrast to the definition of one who has joined Christianity as being impure in his very essence. Generally speaking, the

Jewish writings describe the motivation of the convert to Christianity in terms of surrender to his lower, animalistic, sexual instincts. There is no acknowledgement that these Jews may have been convinced by the Christian theological truth, or by the beauty or physical majesty of Christianity. Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moshe (Or Zaru'a), in the thirteenth century, takes a term from the Talmud in order to describe the convert 's subjugation to his physical appetites, using the expression 'one who deliberately gives himself an erection' (*maksheh atzmo la-da'at*) as tantamount to 'apostate.' R. Ami, in the Talmud, describes the type who becomes addicted to the pleasures of the flesh: 'For thus is the guile of the Evil Urge: today it says to you 'Do this,' and he does so, and tomorrow it says 'Go worship idols,' and he goes and worships them.' R. Ami, who lived in the Land of Israel during the third century, refers to this type as a 'transgressor'; R. Yitzhak ben Moshe in thirteenth-century Christian Europe refers to him as 'an apostate.'⁴

The severest attitude is reserved for those elements within Jewish society that were perceived as weakest. On the one hand, they need to be cultivated so that they do not break, but they must also be defined as a potential danger. An example of this is found in the behavior towards children. As I have shown in my study of the attitude towards Jewish children in the Middle Ages in Christian Europe, Jewish children are the subject of a proprietary, concerned, and fashioning attitude during this period. They are smothered with physical affection, there is sensitivity to their physical vulnerability, and great attention is given to their education. They will be attacked in the future by the Christians; they are the first target of Christian missionary efforts. The Jews are concerned that they will be captured and taken by force and raised as Christians.⁵ Therefore, as much as the attitude towards them is caring and positive, it is also harsh and distancing in the event that these efforts fail and the children become Christians, even against their will.

We have already noted that the attitude towards children whose parents abandoned Judaism and converted to Christianity was extremely harsh. The question asked in this context regarding a small child whose parents in practice converted him against his will—what difference does it make?—is a logical one. The answer given is that, if he dies as a Christian and does not manage a return to Judaism, the attitude towards him does not take into account that Christianity was imposed upon him unknowingly. To the contrary, it is derived from the bare fact that he died as a Christian; it is a happy event that he died and did not continue his life as a Christian. While this is also the halakhic position of Rabbenu Tam, it is rooted in a mentality of competition for those Jews whom the Christians, from the Jewish point

of view, had tried to convert in missionary fashion. The halakhic decision here derives from the mental attitude towards this competition. The power with which it dismissed the sympathetic attitude that might have been expected towards the exceptional case of a child who died after his parents had converted him to Christianity without his understanding, is symptomatic of the negative attitude towards the convert to Christianity generally, who died as a Christian and did not recant of his 'error' while still alive. Notwithstanding the halakhic justification, the perspective is one of mentality.⁶

In societies under siege, such an attitude derives from the need to strengthen those who, in the eyes of society, are perceived as weak sub-groups within it. The attitude towards women is similar.

The woman is perceived as representing the ability of the community to stand up for its values. The woman is perceived in an ambivalent manner: on the one hand she is seen as strong and representative, but at the same time as weak and easily persuaded or influenced. In Jewish descriptions of Christian violence directed against them during the First Crusade, and the Christian attempts to convert them to Christianity even by force and by means of threats upon their lives, the woman appears at the forefront of active opposition to forced conversion, and among those who turned to the path of martyrdom 'for Kiddush Hashem'; they are an example inspiring the men not to convert to Christianity even under coercion or duress, and even merely for appearance, acting decisively to sacrifice their very lives. These descriptions are not ones that the men initiated in order to strengthen the feminine image. We learn, from the memorial lists, that the women died in the same numbers as the men during the course of the twelfth century. Women preferred not to convert with their husbands but to remain Jewish, even if this might create difficulties for them in the future. Nevertheless, the male mental perception saw the women as an element which could not, under any circumstances, be allowed to be broken, placing upon them the power and fortitude of the community as a whole. Thus, if women were kidnapped, or broke down and converted for appearances, there developed a harsh and problematic perception of them, as I have analyzed in detail in Chapter 5.

During the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the confident self-definition of the Jew distinguished him in a superior way from the Christian world. A Jew who converted to Christianity did not express, according to the Jews, the victory of Christianity, but only the weakness of that particular Jew. He was tempted, he was weak, and the Jews

expressed their absolute confidence that he would sooner or later return to the Jewish truth. For Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah, at the beginning of the eleventh century, and for the authors of the chronicles of the First Crusade, who wrote at the beginning of the twelfth century, there is a distinct tendency to polemicize with those who converted to Christianity, based on a perception that they would be convinced by the writing and the arguments and return to Judaism. It is possible to discern this optimistic perception in the *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) written by Rabbenu Gershom, as well as in sections from the chronicles written close to the time of the disaster that befell the Jews during the First Crusade. These passages were written for Jews who had been tempted, who had made a mistake, who were forced to convert to Christianity, and now refuse to return to Judaism or try to enjoy the best of both worlds. These writings argue with the decision of these former Jews, out of the assumption that if one were simply to explain to them in a suitable manner the facts of life and the eternity and purity of Judaism as against the wickedness and impurity of Christianity and the ludicrousness of their claim that God had regretted His earlier choice and decided to transfer his favor, these former Jews would understand and return to Judaism.

This tendency disappeared entirely during the thirteenth century. The books of polemics written during the thirteenth century were written for internal Jewish consumption, and were intended less, if at all, to persuade Jews who had converted to Christianity. In *Sefer ha-Vikuah* of Yosef ha Mekane there is, it is true, a section that discusses verses in Latin taken from the New Testament. This may have been addressed to Jewish apostates who attempted to convince Jews who remain Jews using ‘proofs’ from the New Testament. But it is more likely that the verses constituted a framework for theological negation of the arguments of Christian missionaries directed against Jews, or as proofs of the crookedness and foolishness of Christian belief, for Jews who knew Latin and were in contact with Christians. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, this element was also missing from the polemical writings. It would seem that the Jews by this time did not consider it necessary to invest much effort in bringing back Jews who had converted to Christianity. They had redefined them, and themselves.

At the end of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh century, Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah attempted to organize a *takkanah* (Rabbinic edict) to prevent Jews from mentioning the past to those who had converted to Christianity and returned in repentance to Judaism; and to prevent those Jews who had remained Jews from referring to a former apostate with negative or insulting names. He did this so that

apostates would not hesitate to return to Jewish society out of fear that they would be accepted badly or in an insulting manner by their Jewish brethren. It is almost certain that, during the age of Rabbenu Gershom, those who had converted and subsequently returned to Judaism were harmed and subjected to insulting terms by other Jews. Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah, as leader, attempted to combat this phenomenon; it may have been of particular importance to him because of his son's conversion to Christianity; in any event, it is clear that he saw his *takkanah* in terms of the need to return the former converts to their Judaism.

Subsequently, this edict seems to have been completely forgotten. Thus, during the first half of the thirteenth century Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moshe, 'Or Zaru'a,' does not know at all of such a *takkanah*. Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moshe came from the East and stayed for a lengthy period of time in northern France, studied in almost all the famous centers of learning in France, then went to Germany, and there too he went from one yeshiva to another in order to learn with most of the central Jewish teachers of the mid-thirteenth century. Yet R. Yitzhak ben Moshe does not know at all of such a *takkanah*. He sees conversion to Christianity as a shameful thing, which he describes in the words, 'a shame and a scandal for his children.' If a person is referred to with insulting names, it is the task of the judges of the community to decide how to deal with him, as someone who has shamed his fellows. But there is no emphasis upon any special protection of one who had converted and returned. The attitude towards the convert to Christianity no longer derives from the wish to prevent his being insulted because this might prevent him from returning to Judaism. The attitude towards the apostate ceased to be a problem of the 'Jewish entity' and simply became a matter of insult as such.⁷ The significance of this is simple: the Jewish group sees the convert to Christianity as one who has betrayed his Judaism, whose essence has been harmed, and it no longer awaits his speedy return, his acknowledging his error, and his thereby strengthening Judaism's theological victory. This approach finds expression, of course, in the halakhic aspects of what the Jewish leaders decided to impose upon the apostate who wishes to return to Judaism.⁸ Moreover, beyond the intricacies of the halakhic discussion, we can see and understand the mental approach in which, on the folk level, the apostate is seen as a traitor to his people, and from this moment on as one who is not deserving to be, or to be considered as, a Jew, even in his hidden Jewish essence, until such time as he returns to Judaism.

The most substantial change is found at the end of the thirteenth century, in the writing of R. Meir ben Baruch (Maharam) of Rothenburg,

particularly in his overall substantive statement regarding the convert to Christianity, one that radically alters the decisions of Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah, and of Rashi from the end of the eleventh century in France. R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg explains this new view in relation to a woman who had married a Jewish man who died, and now needs to receive *halitzah* (release from potential levirate marriage) from his brother who has become a Christian. Rashi stated that in such a case the woman requires *halitzah* and, being aware of the Geonic responsum that states otherwise, stated explicitly that it was impossible to rely on this Geonic ruling. R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg and his disciples completely uproot this decision of Rashi,⁹ adhering to the view that lay at the basis of the Geonic decision—namely, that if at the time the couple was married the brother of the bridegroom, i.e., the *yabam*, had already changed his religion, and thereafter the husband died leaving no offspring, his wife is not required to receive *halitzah* from her brother-in-law. R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg strengthens the stance of the Geonim against that of Rashi on the basis of a ‘proof’ brought from *Tractate Bava Kamma* (110b), concerning the possibility that a condition which is not articulated explicitly, i.e., an ‘implied condition,’ can nevertheless be used to nullify a contract. According to the Talmud, it is difficult to accept such a halakhah, for that would enable an easy solution for the problem of a woman whose husband died and whose *yabam* suffers from boils. There, too, we could argue that at the time of the marriage there was an implied condition that, should the husband die, the marriage would be retroactively nullified, for certainly no woman would want to live with a person suffering from boils. The Talmud rejects this argument by saying that a woman would in fact prefer to be married, even to a husband with boils, rather than to be left alone and single. R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg infers from this that, in such a case, where the *yabam* suffers from boils, the woman would prefer to live with him (rather than to be left by herself), but that this is not the case where he had converted his religion. In that case, life shared with him would be opposed to halakhah because of the suspicion that the apostate husband would influence his new wife to change her religion, and indeed we find extensive Jewish activity involving cases in which the husband converts and his wife remains Jewish, in which the community takes concerted actions to separate them.¹⁰ In such a case, therefore, one may invoke the argument of implied condition, and assume that, had the woman known at the time of her marriage that her husband would die and that she would need to marry his apostate brother, she would not agree to such a marriage and it is considered as nullified from the outset. This is R. Meir

ben Baruch of Rothenburg's argument. However, the question arises that R. Meir's argument is only valid where the brother in fact converted prior to the marriage, so that already then she could have foreseen the possibility that her husband would die and she would need to marry his brother. But in fact, in the case under discussion, the brother converted after the couple's marriage. Hence, it is not reasonable that the woman could imagine that her brother-in-law would convert to Christianity, and therefore we do not have here even an implied condition. But despite this argument, the author of the response claims that, even if the conversion had taken place while the couple was already married, one could still argue that there was an implied condition. Thus Rabbi Abraham ha-Gadol asks: In the case of a *yabamah* (childless widow), who falls before an apostate for *halitzah*, does she need to receive *halitzah* from him and is she considered a married woman so long as her apostate brother-in-law has not granted *halitzah*? R. Yitzhak ben Moshe of Vienna, the Or Zaru'a, writes: It is written in the response of Rav Nahshon Gaon and in the book (*Basar*) *al ha-Gehalim*, and in the response of many other authorities, that if a *yabam* was an apostate at the time of his brother's marriage and is still an apostate, his sister-in-law is exempt from the obligation of receiving *halitzah* and is allowed to marry whomever she wishes. Moreover, this halakhah applies even if the apostate brother returned to Judaism after the husband's death because at the time that her husband was still alive, his wife assumed that she would never agree to live with her apostate brother-in-law, and it is as if this condition was already explicit at the time of the marriage. According to Rabbenu Hananel, this rule applies even if the brother was a practicing Jew at the time of his brother's marriage but converted prior to his brother's death: he does not give *halitzah* and does not perform *yibbum* (levirate marriage), and his sister-in-law may marry whomever she wishes.

The position held by Rashi, which relates in principle to the concept that the apostate remains a Jew in his essence, changed in light of the approach of the halakhic sages of the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries. R. Abraham ha-Gadol and Rabbenu Hananel think that the woman in our case is allowed to marry *ab initio*, without *halitzah*. In other words, they do not accept the view that the apostate's essential Jewishness was not altered by his conversion to Christianity. Even according to those who adhered to the stricter view of Rashi prohibiting such a woman from marrying, would accept such a marriage retroactively. Nevertheless, we find a great deal of unease among the judges, who waver between the approach of Rashi and those views brought at the end of the thirteenth century. The son of R. Yitzhak ben Moshe received an angry

letter on this subject at the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century, in which its authors urge him to examine the writings of his father and tell them, finally, his father's position so that they may know how to decide:

Behold, I appeal to you a second time regarding the matter of a woman who has a levir dependence upon an apostate *yabam*, who already converted at the time she was married, according to the words of our French rabbis. And your words to us are too brief, for you did not clarify to us whether our Teacher and Master, your father, decided in his book according to the words of those who are permissive or not, for we did not understand his reasons.¹¹

In other words, in principle they accepted the view of R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg and found a way to justify it from a halakhic viewpoint. In the final analysis, during the fifteenth century this problematic situation was corrected by ruling that, if the bridegroom had a brother who had converted to Christianity, a condition was made at the time of the marriage that, 'should she fall before an apostate for *halitzah*, the marriage is retroactively annulled.'¹² The hope lying at the basis of Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah's approach, i.e., that there was a possibility that the apostate might return to Judaism, and Rashi's view that one did not forego the Jewish essence of the convert to Christianity, had completely disappeared.

As we have seen, during the thirteenth century people depicted the figure of the person who had converted to Christianity not as one who had committed an error, nor as one who had been seduced by bodily temptations and appetites, but rather as one who had been convinced by Christianity and, especially, as one who intended to harm Judaism in a severe manner. His Jewish past, and at times also his expertise in Jewish writings, gave him destructive potential as one who intended to harm, and often did harm, the very essence of Jewish existence in the Christian world. Rabbi Moses of Coucy in France, and R. Meir ben Menahem and R. Yedidya, who all remembered the horrible experience at the time of the burning of the Talmud in Paris, as the result of the acts of an apostate, understood and described this personality—the zealous apostate. The damage which this zealous apostate wished to cause derived from his profound understanding of the central views of the Jewish people and its hopes, and it was precisely these fundamentals that the apostates wished to harm. They fully deserved the uncompromising appellation they were given by members of what was formerly their people—*meshumadim* (literally, 'destroyed ones'). Donin wished to harm the halakhic heart of Judaism—the Talmud. He

deliberately ignored the usual Christian direction of theological debate with the principles of Judaism, and the attempt to achieve a theological victory in polemics, directing his arrows against what he saw as the embodiment of the very soul of the Jewish people. It is that which he wishes to harm—and does.

And indeed, at the end of the thirteenth century, when R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg attempted to initiate an 'Exodus' of the Jews from Germany after having identified a substantive change in the attitude of the imperial rulers towards the Jews, 'he sets out on a journey eastward,' evidently in the direction of the Land of Israel. An apostate Jew identifies him and brings about his arrest and prolonged imprisonment. The potential for harm on the part of the apostate Jew, which R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg identified well from the moment of his own terrible experience with the apostate Donin which led to the burning of the Talmud, manifested itself in an ironic and bitter manner on himself, and an apostate Jew was able to halt the most important act of R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg, his attempt to extract his community from Germany—and the Jewish community saw this.

It should be emphasized that the apostate's advice to the emperor was to take R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg captive as the Jewish community certainly would not allow him to wallow in prison and would redeem him for whatever sum of money the emperor might impose upon them. It is explicitly stated that 'the king [emperor] believed the apostate' and he put R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg in prison. But the latter ordered his fellow Jews not to pay an excessive amount for his release, but only a relatively small amount of money. As a result he remained imprisoned for seven years, until he died in prison. In the end, a certain Jew ransomed his body for an enormous sum, asking only that after his own death he be buried near R. Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg. To this day it is possible to see the double graves, adjacent to one another, at the entrance to the ancient Jewish cemetery in Worms. The story is recorded on the gravestones for future generations. Every Jew who enters the cemetery sees the two tombstones containing the well-known story of the treacherous behavior of the apostate Jew against a prominent Jewish leader. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Rabbi Yuzfa Shemesh writes that 'a certain apostate informer denounced him to the King of Rome.'¹³ It is this perception that accompanies the Jewish apostate from Rothenburg's time onwards, and it finds expression in the growth of folk stories literature.

Towards the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, we find a substantial change in the folk literature related to

apostasy. During this period one begins to find legendary traditions intended to explain and to rationalize the conversion to Christianity of important figures in medieval Jewry, such as the sons of Rabbi Shimon bar Yitzhak 'ha-Gadol' and that of Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah. In these writings (first published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in 1602), we find a new attitude towards the conversion to Christianity of Elhanan, son of R. Shimon bar Yitzhak, an extraordinary eleventh-century *paytan* (liturgical poet).¹⁴ Elhanan was kidnapped from the Jews as a small child by a Christian woman, who gave him to the Church to raise him. He was a talented child, and so successful in the Church that he became pope. From this high office he understood the extent to which Christianity was mistaken and succeeded in establishing renewed contact with his Jewish father. There are various different endings to the story: he succeeds in fleeing and lives secretly in Worms; he nullifies an edict that had been imposed upon the Jews; he dies as a Jew, sanctifying the Great Name, and his father includes his name in a liturgical poem.¹⁵ This folk story portrays the conversion of Jews to Christianity, their ascent to high levels within the Christian Church, and, upon reaching the pinnacle of the hierarchy, their being motivated to take care of those Jews who remained in the community or to die as a Jewish martyr. Such a story is an important vehicle for explaining the deviant behavior of Jewish converts to Christianity. The clear message is that Elhanan had a 'Jewish' goal in his deviant behavior: his deviant behavior not improper behavior that weakens the position of the original group, but rather emphasizes the ability of the minority group to succeed in causing theological harm at the central weak point of the rival religion. The Jew who succeeds in deceiving the forces of Christianity succeeds at the same time not only in saving his Jewish community, but also to show that the religion to which he had converted is not the true religion, and that he, as the son of an important Jew, was never truly convinced by the Christian religion—not even as pope!

There likewise emerged a legend concerning the conversion to Christianity of the son of Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah. According to this folk legend from the beginning of the fourteenth century, Rabbenu Gershom wrote the *piyyut*—'My throat is hoarse from crying out against violence / I have seen the wicked ones allowing the holy to be trod down / Hear my cry and let the day of vengeance come'—after his son had thrown his Prayer Book to the ground in the middle of Yom Kippur, left the synagogue, and converted to Christianity.¹⁶ When his wife saw his great pain, she disclosed to him that once, on the night that she returned from the *mikveh*, she had been raped by a Christian horseman, and that

this child was the result of the rape. As proof that this had been a violent rape and that she tried to resist to the best of her ability, she kept the earlobe which she bitten off her assailant in the middle of the struggle 'and Rabbi Gershom's mind was quieted.' Of course, the story is a-historic and non-halakhic, flavored with the detail of the ear that had been bitten off as a symbol of 'the maiden who is raped and cries out and none hears.' Moreover, it bypasses any halakhic discussion of the issue of the rape, for if the woman is raped the son is in fact considered to be that of the putative father, her husband.¹⁷

During the eleventh century, in the age of Rabbi Shimon and Rabbenu Gershom, Jewish self-identity was so self-evident that it was impossible to refute it through stories of converts to Christianity. However, during the centuries that followed, the Jews experienced a religious crisis that led to certain cases of willing conversion to Christianity; there were apostate Jews who caused their brethren great harm in every realm, so that their self-confidence progressively declined in light of this phenomenon. The representation of the convert to Christianity as one who was undeserving from the outset to be considered as part of the Jewish people made it easier to accept this phenomenon, particularly as it was accompanied by that of proselytism, of Christians of a high level who were prepared to join Judaism. The ultimate test for a Jew, that of martyrdom, was now carried out by proselytes, former Christians who were prepared, at the cost of their own lives, to prove that Judaism was victorious and that the view that one was to oppose Christianity to the point of death was stronger than the tolerant view that a Jew who had deviated and become a Christian nevertheless continued to be defined as a Jew as long as he lived.

These two folk legends clearly exemplify those approaches that emerged in light of the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity by Jews. The first story shows that the Jew who converted to Christianity did not really convert; the second emphasizes that the Jew who converts to Christianity was not a 'pure Jew.' In this respect, the second story is similar to passages we have found among the Ashkenazic *hasidim*, stating that the soul is at times misplaced within the wrong body; thus, the soul of the son of Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah was not a Jewish soul. It is self-evident that, in order to complete the discussion of converts to Christianity from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, we must now examine the mirror image that was developing at the same time—the phenomenon of conversion to Judaism.

Just as the Jewish group redefined its attitude to apostates in light of historical developments, so too did it with regard to those who converted

to Judaism. As acts of martyrdom, of death for Kiddush Hashem increased, and the view that one ought to kill oneself and not convert to Christianity, not even to the mere appearance of it, became the dominant one; and as the number of those who willingly converted to Christianity increased, and particularly when these Christianizers began to cause concrete harm to the Jewish community, the attitude towards converts to Christianity became extremely negative and their halakhic definition as 'brethren' was greatly weakened. As the situation of the Jews became increasingly difficult, and as it became more dangerous for a Christian to convert to Judaism, the attitude towards proselytes likewise changed. They began to be perceived as people who were preparing themselves for a martyr's death by the very fact of their conversion, and as dying a martyr's death in the literal sense when they were caught and willing to die rather than to return to Christianity. While this phenomenon already appeared at the time of the First Crusade, as we have seen, it did not find its full expression until the end of the twelfth century, and even more so during the course of the thirteenth century, which was an exceedingly difficult period for the Jews. In the consciousness of the Jews, the proselyte was the polar opposite of the convert to Christianity. He was adorned with expressions of endearment, while the convert to Christianity was called an 'apostate,' an expression of distance and alienation. The proselyte had cast off the pagan world, while the convert to Christianity took that world upon himself. The proselyte was prepared to die as a martyr for his faith, while the apostate to Christianity lost his faith and his world, and harmed the Jews.

From the fourteenth century on, there were an increasing number of examples of Jews who converted to Christianity and attempted to cause harm to their former coreligionists. This damage might consist of simple things, such as attempts to damage the Sabbath *eruv* (the symbolic boundary around the Jewish community enabling Jews to carry objects from one place to another), thereby making it very difficult for Jews to function in their community on the Sabbath. Harming the *eruv* was an act whose aim was to cause nuisance to the Jews and make it difficult for them to celebrate their holy day in a peaceful and convenient manner. If a Gentile damaged the *eruv*, making it halakhically unfit, he did so because he wished to spoil something related to the Jews that was within 'his' urban space. A Jew who converted to Christianity and was familiar with the mechanism of the *eruv* and its importance in the life of the Jews damaged it out of a desire to strike a blow specifically at a point with which he was familiar.¹⁸

The most substantial blows against medieval Jews began with the publication of libels against them by Jews who had converted to Christianity.

Thomas of Monmouth, who publicized the story concerning the supposed murder by the Jews of the child William of Norwich (1144), begins with the assumption that the Jews indeed need to kill a Christian child, because he had heard this from an apostate Jew, Theobald of Cambridge.¹⁹ The libel regarding Jewish desecration of the Host began in 1290 in Paris when an apostate Jew named Jean de Thilrode related the account, in the first person: a Parisian Jew named Jonathan purchased the sacred bread, the Host, from a Christian servant woman. Jonathan supposedly gathered the Jews together for the ceremony of profaning the Host. They attempted to divide the bread, but did not succeed. Thereafter the bread broke by itself into three parts and blood began to flow from it. When the Jews threw pieces of the bread into a pot of boiling water, the bread turned into a human being. Jean and his family immediately converted, blaming Jonathan and his family for the act. As a result he was arrested by the bishop of Paris and then executed.²⁰

The harsh events of the pogroms of Rindfleisch and of Armeleder (end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries) began as the result of stories told by Jews who had converted to Christianity concerning a supposed Jewish plot to steal the Host and to profane it, just as they had done to the body of Jesus, and still attempt to do. The acts of slaughter referred to as Rindfleisch began as a result of such a libel started by apostates and involved more than 150 communities in southern Germany and Austria, where more than 20,000 people were murdered (the numbers vary between 20,000 and 100,000).²¹

In a detailed study by Miri Rubin of libels connected with the Host, she proves that apostate Jews were involved in almost every libel concerning Jews allegedly attempting to steal the Host in order to profane it or harm it. It was they who informed on the (supposed) acts of the Jews, and who reported in detail the tortures which the Jews performed upon the Host, and were the prize witnesses who reported the miracles performed by the Host which the Jews had attempted to desecrate. Between 1369 and 1370 an attempt was made to harm the new Jewish community in Brussels, and against the wealthy and noted Jew, Jonathan of Enghien. This was done by apostates, one of whom describes how the Jews obtained the sacred bread and how they harmed it. The second describes how Jonathan's wife persuaded him to smuggle the Host to Cologne. The Jews were dragged through the streets of Brussels and were then executed.²² At the end of the fourteenth century, an apostate named Peter (formerly Pesah), who engaged in polemics with Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann-Muhlhausen, emphasized that the Jews sought the destruction of Christianity, harming the sanctity of the

Host in order to do so. As a result of this accusation, about eighty Jews who had been placed in prison were executed. Peter also explained the ritual of *bi'ur hametz*, the burning of remnants of leavened bread before Passover, as an anti-Christian act. Peter denounced the Jews, accusing them of horrible acts on the basis of his reliable knowledge as a former Jew. The burning of *hametz* before Passover is thus brought as a proof of the burning of the Host.²³

One of the most dangerous personalities for Jews living in the middle of the fifteenth century was the Franciscan monk John of Capistrano, who was assisted in providing a basis for his anti-Jewish actions by a group of apostate Jews. He succeeded, in the course of a public debate, to convince an important Roman Jew to convert to Christianity; he brought about the expulsion of the Jews from Bavaria; he caused the suspension of Jewish privileges, and the restriction of their rights in Sicily. In 1453, he made use of the testimony of Jewish apostates against their former brethren for desecrating the Host, leading to the slaughter of the Jews of Breslau.²⁴ In the 1470s, Jewish apostates repeatedly informed on their former brethren, citing various acts of ritual murder of children or profaning the Host. In the majority of cases, imperial investigation revealed these accusations to be false, but on occasion Jews were nevertheless imprisoned or expelled.²⁵ At the beginning of the sixteenth century (Frankfurt, 1515), an apostate Jew accused the Jews of hanging the Host which they had stolen on the wall of the synagogue. During the second half of the sixteenth century in Italy, after the Counter-Reformation, the number of Jews who converted to Christianity and conveyed information about acts of the Jews increased. The most dangerous figure among these was Alessandro Francesca (Hananel de Polonia). Among other things, he reported, in the wake of the murder of a child in Rome in 1555, that 'every year, between Purim and Passover, the Jews are accustomed to murdering a gentile child.'²⁶

What was the real place of the Jewish apostates within the overall complex of this story? Did the Christian authors choose to place them so clearly and centrally as those accusing their brethren in order to give a more serious, exact, and credible status to the stories of the horrors committed by the Jews? Was the place of the Jewish apostates so central in Christian writing because they were the central witnesses to the victory of Christianity? Did the Jewish apostates in fact inform on their erstwhile brethren because they attempted to harm the Host, sought to destroy the Christian world, and more? Generally speaking, this was in fact the case.²⁷ For example, during the first half of the sixteenth century, the apostate Antonios Margerita explained the songs of the Passover Haggadah as curses

directed by the Jews against Christians and Christianity. The apostate Victor von Corbin tells of the liturgical poems for Yom Kippur in which the Jews curse the Christians.²⁸ The dissemination of these stories served the New Christians as an entrance ticket to the new world. Moreover, generally speaking there burned within them the fire of Christian faith, and they were convinced that they had the power to overcome their former brethren in polemics and to show them the light.²⁹

From the Jewish point of view, this abandonment of Judaism was doubly treacherous. It was not only that the apostates attached themselves to the central impurity in the world; that they abandoned their brethren in their travails: even worse was the appearance of a group of 'former Jews' who sought to attack Judaism and succeeded, by exploiting their intimate knowledge of Judaism and the Jewish community to focus most effectively their attacks upon the central, substantive, painful point. In this respect, the apostate was seen as a disgusting and lowly figure, one whose return to Judaism was no longer awaited, and even though the old halakhic perception remained (i.e., if he wishes to return, he may do so, and he is to be accepted as a Jew), the popular image of him and his understanding within the Jewish mentality became that of the embodiment of evil.

Notes

- 1 A. S. Abulafia, 'Invectives against Christianity in the Hebrew Chronicles of the First Crusade,' in: *Crusade and Settlement*, ed. P. W. Edbury, Cardiff 1985, pp. 66–72.
- 2 My main field of research: S. Goldin, 'The socialisation for "Kidush ha-Shem" among Medieval Jews,' *Journal of Medieval History* 23 (1997), pp. 117–138; S. Goldin, 'Juifs et juifs convertis au Moyen Age: "Es-tu encore mon frère?,"' *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 54 (1999), pp. 851–874; S. Goldin, 'Jewish Society under Pressure: The Concept of Childhood,' in: *Youth in the Middle Ages*, eds. P. J. Goldberg and F. Riddy, York 2004, pp. 25–43; S. Goldin, *The Ways of Jewish Martyrdom*, Turnhout 2008.
- 3 Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah related in his commentary to a *kohen* (a member of the priestly class) who became a Christian; Rashi explains this as referring to every Jew. See M. Perry, *Tradition and Transformation: Knowledge Transmission among European Jews in the Middle Ages*, Tel Aviv 2010, pp. 128–194. Rabbenu Gershom to *Thanit* 18a; Rashi to Exodus 12:43, 48; Rashi to *Sanhedrin* 22b; Moses of Coucy, *Semag: Sefer Mizvot Gadol*, Jerusalem 1961, Nos. 308, 353, 355.
- 4 Isaac ben Moses, *Sefer Or Zarua*, 4 vols. Zhitomir 1862, Vol. 1, No. 123; *b. Nidha* 13b. See the midrashic literature to Exodus 12:43.

- 5 Goldin, 'Jewish Society under Pressure,' pp. 25–43.
- 6 Goldin, 'Jewish Society under Pressure,' pp. 25–43.
- 7 Isaac ben Moses, *Sefer Or Zarua*, Vol. 1, No. 751.
- 8 As has been described recently by Kanarfogel articles. E. Kanarfogel, 'Returning to the Jewish Community in Medieval Ashkenaz: History and Halkhah,' in: *Turim*, Studies in Jewish History and Literature Presented to Dr. Bernard Lander, Vol. 1, ed. M. A. Shmidman, New York 2007, pp. 69–97.
- 9 Meir ben Baruch, *Sheelot u-Teshuvot ha-Maharam*, Prague edition, ed. M. A. Blakh, Budapest 1895, No. 1,022.
- 10 See Eliezer ben Joel ha-Levi, *Sefer Ra'aviah*, ed. V. Aptowizer, 5 vols. Jerusalem 1983, 2008, Vol. 5, No. 939; Moses of Coucy, *Semag: Sefer Mizvot Gadol*, Ashin No. 50; Tosafot Rosh *Gittin* 34b; Hayim ben Rabbi Yitzhak, *Responsa*, Leipzig 1860, No. 116.
- 11 Hayim ben Rabbi Yitzhak, *Responsa*, No. 114.
- 12 Joel ben Samuel Sirkis, *Bayit Chadash on Even ha-Ezer, Arba'ah Turim*, Jerusalem 1990, No. 157.
- 13 S. Eidelberg, *R. Juspa, Shammash of Warmaisa (Worms)*, Jerusalem 1991, pp. 78–82; Abraham ben Samuel Zacuto, *Sefer Yuhasin*, Königsberg 1858, p. 223.
- 14 Rabbi Shimon bar Yitzhak was referred to in the Middle Ages with such superlatives as 'a spring flows from his grave,' 'the master of miracles,' 'the Righteous,' 'of the seed of David,' 'the light of the Diaspora, who enlightened the Exile with his hymns.' The name Elhanan appears in the acrostic of a *piyyut* written by his father. See A. Grossman, *The Early Sages of Ashkenaz* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1981, pp. 86–102.
- 15 J. Prinz, *Popes from the Ghetto*, New York 1968; see the translation of the legend pp. 17–20; A. Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 6 vols. Jerusalem 1967, Vol. 5, pp. xxxviii, 148–152; Vol. 6, pp. xxxiii, 137–139; *Ginse Nistaroth*, Vol. 3, ed. J. Kobak, Bamberg 1872, pp. 1–4.
- 16 A. Grossman, 'A Typological Legend about the Conversion of the Son of R. Gershom Me'or ha-Gola,' [Hebrew] in: *Studies in Jewish Narrative, Ma'aseh Sippur, Presented to Yoav Elstein*, eds. A. Lipsker and R. Kushelevsky, Ramat Gan 2006, pp. 65–75.
- 17 This detail appears in the commentary to this *piyyut*. Grossman, 'A Typological Legend,' p. 68, note 10. See *b. Sotah* 27a.
- 18 *Sefer Minhage R. Shalom bar Isaac*, Jerusalem 1997, No. 363.
- 19 *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, eds. A. Jessop and M. R. James, Cambridge 1896, Book II, pp. 93–94; G. Langmuir, *Towards a Definition of Antisemitism*, Los Angeles 1990, pp. 224–226.
- 20 S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 18 vols. Philadelphia 1952–83, Vol. 11, pp. 168, 307–308; P. Browe, *Die eucharistischen Wunder des Mittelalters*, Breslau 1938, pp. 128–132; S. Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, Toronto 1991, pp. 58–60, esp. note 54, p. 50; M. Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*, London 1999, pp. 119–128.

- 21 Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, Vol, 11, pp. 416–418; Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, p. 60, esp. note 57; Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, pp. 119–128.
- 22 Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, pp. 181–182.
- 23 R. Yom-Tov Lipmann-Muhlhausen, *Sefer ha-Nizzahon*, Amsterdam 1827; I. J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, Berkely 2006, pp. 130–133.
- 24 Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, p. 85; Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, pp. 71–74.
- 25 Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, pp. 129–131
- 26 Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, pp. 281–286, esp. p. 285.
- 27 J. Elukin, 'From Jew to Christian? Conversion and Immutability in Medieval Europe,' in: *Varieties of Religious conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Muldoon, Gainesville, Fla. 1997, pp. 171–189.
- 28 Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, pp. 123, 130–131.
- 29 The new type, that of the apostate who delivered crippling blows to the community from which he had come, was of course a well-known phenomenon in Spain, as were the well-known apostates who tirelessly acted against their former brethren in order to convince them to convert to Christianity, such as Alphonso of Wallalid = Abner of Burgos; Paulus de Santa Maria = Shlomo Halevi; and Heronymus de Santa Feda = Joshua Halorki. Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2 vols. Philadelphia 1961, 1966), Vol. 1, pp. 152–159.