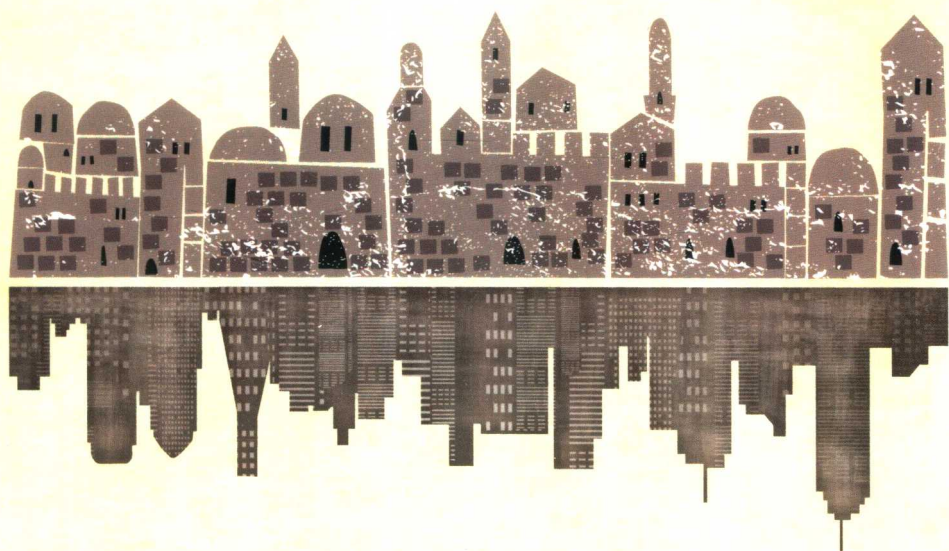


Stories from Biblical Times to Today

Converts to Judaism



LAWRENCE J. EPSTEIN

CONVERTS TO JUDAISM

Stories from Biblical Times to Today

Lawrence J. Epstein

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
A wholly owned subsidiary of
The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB,
United Kingdom

Copyright © 2015 by Rowman & Littlefield

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Epstein, Lawrence J. (Lawrence Jeffrey)

Converts to Judaism : stories from biblical times to today / Lawrence J. Epstein.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4422-3467-3 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4422-3468-0 (electronic)

1. Conversion—Judaism—History. 2. Jewish converts—Biography. I. Title.

BM729.P7E664 2015

296.7'10922—dc23

2014034409

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

CONVERTS TO JUDAISM

*This book is dedicated to my grandchildren
Lily, Grayson, and Emilia Rose*

PREFACE

In about 1140, the Spanish Jewish philosopher Yehuda Halevi wrote a book widely known as the *Kuzari*. The book is a dialogue between the king of a group of people called the Khazars and a rabbi. The king is trying to figure out which religion his people should follow. As Halevi constructs the debate, the rabbi does not offer logical proofs of God's existence. Instead, the rabbi considers Jewish history as a key to understanding the Jewish people. The rabbi recounts how Jews were able to survive after losing their nation and so consistently facing poverty and persecution. How, he wonders, could they maintain their faith and their reliable moral compass in the most hostile conditions life offers?

Prompted by Halevi's approach, I want in this book to examine an underappreciated part of that history, the contributions converts to Judaism have made to the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. The book isn't an argument to welcome converts, although in the last chapter I will provide the sort of argument that is inherent in Jewish history. Instead, I provide this history because I believe it offers the best proof that encouraging converts to Judaism is codified in Jewish law, coheres with the most basic beliefs of Judaism, is part of the Jewish spiritual vocation, has a noble past filled with colorful characters, and offers a promising

future. I am not unaware of or indifferent to the communal concerns some people have about conversions. I try in this volume to discuss every one of those concerns in a fair way.

History is vital to the Jewish people. Jews believe in their shared destiny, in the significance of their historic spiritual journey, and so in the significance of every act they undertake, seeing it as accelerating or retarding their personal spiritual growth and the achievement of a better world. Jews see themselves as partners with God in the ongoing work of creation, and so every person and every contribution is vital, every day a chance for renewal, every adversity a hurdle to be leaped. In this book, I try to show that converts have contributed immensely as the Jewish people traversed paths through a sometimes painfully difficult world. The book traces the history of conversion to Judaism in Jewish life, the legal tangles, the attractions of the Jewish faith, the resistance to converts that grew, and the fate of conversion in the story of the Jewish people.

I've had a long-standing interest in the subject of converts to Judaism. Many people assume that there must be a personal reason for this interest. There is a reason, but it is not obvious. My wife, for example, was born Jewish. I don't know of any of my or her ancestors who were converts. Indeed, I am a Kohen, a purported descendant of Aaron and therefore from a priestly class not allowed to marry converts in traditional Judaism. My interest is therefore not familial, but it is autobiographical. While I was born and raised as a Jew, I had no emotional connection to being Jewish, no strong ties. And then, in my early twenties, I went on a search for faith, much like the king of the Khazars, but, unlike the king, I found that faith in my own spiritual backyard. My "conversion" to Judaism wasn't literal, but I intensely identified with all those people who, having sought and searched, found in Judaism the guidelines for believing and living.

I began to study why converts joined the Jewish people. I wrote some books about conversion, including a guidebook for those who wished to become Jewish. As I talked to many people, I realized that converts were not always understood, that all they had given to their adopted people were too often hidden gifts.

This book is an attempt to give converts their true and justified place in Jewish history.

I start with an overview of the subject and then proceed era by historical era, starting naturally with biblical times. As I proceed, the converts discussed are put in historical context. It is crucial to understand, for example, the immense spiritual and often physical courage that converts had to face and the arc of Jewish efforts to encourage their conversion and welcome them to Jewish life. This courage often included confronting the persecution they faced for joining the Jewish people. The story of welcoming converts also includes withdrawing from such activities on a widespread basis and, slowly, recovering the initial impulse to welcome new Jews. I also try to trace the evolution of conversion in Jewish law to see how it adapted and found a place for converts. I offer an interpretation that encouraging converts is a mandated task for the Jewish people, that Jews should welcome sincere converts without using any pressure on them. This interpretation is embedded in the historical march of the book.

All writers are reluctant to fence off the intended readership of their books, to limit those who might find it useful. But I did have certain audiences in mind as I planned this work. I hope, in particular, that converts, would-be converts, their friends, and their families will find support in these pages as they witness the unfolding pageant of the people they or their loved ones join. I wanted to write for Jews who remain suspicious of converts, who wonder whether they are genuinely Jewish or what they can add to Jewish life. The book is meant for anyone interested in relig-

ious history, Jewish history, and the individual soul's sometimes disquieting, often heroic, struggle to find a home.

I invite you, the reader, also to explore the mysteries of the past, to see the staggering ways history has shaped all of us. History is within us, and we are within history. Knowing our past, carrying it with us, helps us understand who we are, how we got here, and where we might go. Jewish history is surely unique. The Jews have been everywhere, encountered every hostility the cosmos can throw at a people, and endured seemingly unendurable suffering, yet here we are, still struggling, still fueled by a fire in every vein, still curious about tomorrow. The Jewish story is a good one to follow, and the place of converts in that story has within it more than a few surprises.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The subject of conversion to Judaism has interested me for a long while, and my debt to all those who have studied and written about the subject, who have talked to me about it, who have undertaken the journey to Judaism themselves, and who have provided advice and materials is enormous. I could start with the people throughout Jewish history who have been interested in this subject and, through their efforts, fascinated me.

More exactly, I could go back to each of the articles and books I wrote about conversion and thank everyone who helped with those. My writing books about conversion began with Arthur Kurzweil, then at Jason Aronson Inc., who, knowing of my interest in the subject, suggested I write a guidebook for converts. I interviewed hundreds of converts and many experts for that book. I corresponded or spoke profitably with a variety of people. They included Rabbi Marc Angel, Prof. Nicholas de Lange, Leonard Fein, Dr. Louis Feldman, Rabbi Steven E. Foster, Dr. Robert Gordis, of blessed memory, Julius Lester, Dennis Prager, and many others. They provided some of the foundation for my thinking.

The literature on conversion to Judaism is nowhere conveniently collected, yet there is a lot of it. To get at it required a

sustained effort by archivists and librarians to help me locate some of the material. I've worked with people at literally dozens of libraries. I thank the American Jewish Historical Society, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America Library, the Asher Library of the Spertus College of Judaica, the *Jerusalem Post* archives, the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion Library, the Harvard University Library, and so many others. I want to thank particularly Kevin Proffitt of the American Jewish Archives. I have called on him many times to get material, and he has always provided what I needed in a timely and useful fashion.

There are some people mentioned in this book who were crucial in the history of conversion to Judaism who helped me along the way. They include Rabbi Moshe M. Maggal, who invited me to serve as vice president of the National Jewish Information Service, David Horowitz, and Rabbi Alexander Schindler, who gave me an extraordinarily extensive interview about his famous conversion proposal. It was this interview that became the basis for my first article about conversion.

For this particular book, I got advice from numerous people.

They include Rabbi Stephen Karol, Rabbi Adam Fisher, Dr. Harry Ostrer, Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, Rabbi Haim Beliak, Rabbi Leah Cohen, Dr. Lawrence Grossman, Dr. Seth Forman, Dawn Kepler, Sue Fishkoff, Nan Gefen, Rabbi Adam Greenwald, Rabbi David J. B. Krishef, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, Rabbi Carol Levithan, Rabbi Steve Fox, Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner, Rabbi Sharon Brous, Rabbi Laura Geller, and Rabbi Ed Feinstein. I also got advice from several people who deserve historical credit for writing about conversion for a very long time. They include Rabbi Steven Foster, Rabbi Allen Maller, and Rabbi Gilbert Kollin. In fact, it was an article I read by Rabbi Kollin early in 1975 that first introduced me to the subject of conversion to Judaism.

There is a reason authors are so careful to point out that any mistakes in the book are the authors' alone and are not due to the people who helped them. That is certainly true in this book, and if I have made errors in fact or interpretation, I bear responsibility for them despite the best efforts of all these people to lead me to the truth.

I would also like to thank Sarah Stanton and the entire professional and dedicated staff at Rowman & Littlefield as well as an anonymous academic reviewer of the book who read the manuscript with enormous care and provided valuable material.

Of course, it is impossible to write any book without the constant support of a family. In this regard, I have been particularly fortunate. My parents, Fred and Lillian Epstein, of blessed memory, always encouraged my writing efforts. My brother, Richard, is my first reader for all my books. He has listened patiently across the years to many discussions about conversion. His wife, Perla, and their children, Adam and Sondra and their families, are always supportive.

My children and their spouses, Michael Epstein and Sophia Cacciola, Elana and Justin Reiser, Rachel and John Eddey, and Lisa and Florian Christen are all great, warm, kind, and supportive people.

My grandchildren, in birth order, are Lily Reiser, Grayson Eddey, and Emilia Rose Christen. The book's dedication to them is a small indication of the comfort they bring to me, the promise of a great future that they offer.

Finally, my wife, Sharon, is there every hour of every day to provide love and companionship, support and advice. The importance of her presence in my life is immeasurable.

CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction: Welcoming the Stranger: The Place of Converts in Jewish Life	I
1 Your People Shall Be My People: Converts in the Biblical Era	17
2 Over Land and Sea: The Rise of Proselytism in the Hellenistic and Early Roman Period	29
3 A Fence around the Torah: Converts in the Talmudic Era	45
4 The Time of Religious Struggle: Converts in the Medieval Era	63
5 Leaving the Ghetto: Converts from the Jewish Enlightenment to the Present	81
6 The Golden Land: Converts in the United States	107
7 The Call of Zion: Converts in Israel	151
8 Lessons from the History of Conversion to Judaism	161

Glossary	191
References	195
Index	201

INTRODUCTION: WELCOMING THE STRANGER

The Place of Converts in Jewish Life

He was the first US consul to Jerusalem, originally drawn to the sacred land to become a missionary to the Jewish people. But, as it does to so many people, Jerusalem had a dazzling effect on him. He came more and more to identify with the Jewish people, and eventually, against the advice of the local rabbi, he converted to Judaism. When he returned to his home in Philadelphia, his wife and family, shocked at his religious conclusions, had him put in a mental hospital. A court ruled him insane.

His name was Warder Cresson, and the appeal of his conviction at a lunacy trial in 1851 attracted national attention and fervent discussion. The trial raised crucial questions about religious freedom in the United States and about what it meant for a Gentile to become Jewish. Eventually, the jury declared Cresson innocent. It was judged not a sign of insanity to become Jewish.

Cresson then returned to the Holy Land. There he met Herman Melville and John Steinbeck's grandfather, among others. Cresson became the model of a character in Melville's book-length poem *Clarel*. Once back in the land he felt to be his spiritual home, Cresson tried to teach farming to the Jewish commu-

nity, remarried, and had two children. He died in 1860. All Jewish-owned businesses in Jerusalem were closed on the day of his funeral.

Having to endure an accusation of insanity was not the worst fate a convert to Judaism has suffered in Jewish history. Count Valentine Potocki was a Polish nobleman. According to Jewish sources, Potocki and a friend were in Paris studying when they entered a wine shop and became interested in the owner, who was studying the Talmud. The two friends asked the old man questions about the Hebrew Bible, and, entranced, they requested that he teach them Hebrew. They vowed to become Jews themselves if they could be convinced of Judaism's truth. After six months of study, the friends realized how attracted they were to Judaism. At that time, the first half of the eighteenth century, Amsterdam was the rare European place where a Gentile could embrace Judaism. Potocki went to Amsterdam, became Jewish, and took the name Abraham ben Abraham. He returned to Poland but sought to remain anonymous because there in his home country it was illegal, under penalty of death, to abandon Christianity for Judaism. Potocki was eventually betrayed and arrested. The authorities and his family begged him to renounce Judaism, but Potocki would not do so. He suffered a long imprisonment until he was burned at the stake on May 24, 1749. Tragically, the king had written a letter of pardon for Potocki, but it arrived too late to save him. A supporter bribed a guard to secure his ashes, and those ashes of a Jewish martyr were later buried in the Jewish cemetery. Eventually a tree grew over the burial place and became a destination for pilgrimages by Jews. Vandals ultimately desecrated the gravesite.

Of course, most conversion stories end more happily. There are, though, a lot of unusual conversion stories. One of the strangest involves Reuel Abraham. His birth name was Karl Heinz Schneider. He spent his teen years organizing Nazi youth batta-

lions. At age eighteen, he volunteered for combat service in the Luftwaffe. Dive-bombing was his unit's specialty. One day, Schneider was in Nazi-occupied Poland, walking through a town. There he witnessed some storm troopers murdering Jews in a synagogue's courtyard. Schneider particularly noticed that the rabbi died clutching the Torah.

The incident changed Schneider's life. He started to disobey orders. He dropped bombs on uninhabited areas. He adjusted detonators so that his bombs wouldn't explode. When World War II ended, Schneider vowed to do penance for twenty years. He went to work in coal mines, anonymously donating two-thirds of his salary to organizations aiding war orphans and survivors of the concentration camps. He taught himself Hebrew, and, taking a new name, he began to attend synagogue services.

After the twenty years, Schneider sold his farm and moved to Israel. He approached religious authorities about becoming a Jew. The authorities, at first not believing his story, investigated. When they realized he was telling the truth, they considered his past and what he had done since and accepted his application. Taking the name Reuel Abraham, he became both a Jew and a citizen of Israel.

Some converts were famous, but even their Jewish stories, their contributions to the Jewish people, are not widely known. For example, Elizabeth Taylor was one of the most prominent film actresses in the world. Many people familiar with Taylor's becoming Jewish incorrectly assume that she did so because of her marriage to Jewish film producer Mike Todd. However, it was almost a year after Todd died in an airplane crash that Taylor undertook a ceremony at Temple Israel in Hollywood. On March 27, 1959, the twenty-seven-year-old world-famous star took the Hebrew name Elisheba Rachel and embraced Judaism. She did so because she was attracted to the Jewish heritage. She told one of her biographers that she identified with the Jews as underdogs.