
The Evangelist at Our Door: The American Jewish Response to Christian Missionaries, 1880–1920

by Yaakov Ariel

From the 1880s to 1920 the Jewish community in America was intensely preoccupied with growing Christian missionary activity. Community activists, scholars, journalists, and laymen reacted strongly to the Christian proselytizing efforts and the alleged missionary threat ranked high on the Jewish public agenda. The Jewish responses to the presence of missionaries reflected the concerns, insecurities, and sensitivities of the Jewish community. The reactions serve as an indication of the varied feelings, values, and aspirations of different groups within the Jewish population. The response to the evangelization efforts further shed light on Jewish attitudes towards Christianity and American society at large.

The 1880s and 1890s saw the rise of a large and vigorous movement to evangelize the Jews in America. Motivated by a biblical-messianic understanding of the Jews and their role in history, the missions pursued their cause for decades to come. The same years also witnessed a large Jewish immigration from eastern Europe. From the 1880s to the outbreak of World War I, about two million Jews made their way to America, settling in poor quarters in the largest American cities.¹ The new wave of Protestant missionary interest in the Jews directed itself to the immigrant community. By the 1910s were dozens of missions were operating in virtually all Jewish neighborhoods in America. In some cities such as Chicago or Philadelphia a number of missions were busy evangelizing the Jews. New York had as many as ten.² Missions became part of the scenery of Jewish areas in the American cities. Such evangelization centers were busy preaching, distributing tracts, and offering relief services for needy Jews, the latter in order to demonstrate Christian

charity as well as help establish contacts between the missions and potential converts.

The Jews did not remain indifferent to the aggressive attempts at evangelizing them. Their responses were, however, far from unanimous or consistent. They reflected not only indignation and the insecurity of a minority group but also class differences, self-interest, and paradoxes. The group that encountered the missionaries on a day-to-day basis were the masses of immigrants in the poor neighborhoods. Arriving from eastern Europe, those Jews were generally predisposed against Christianity. Many immigrants came from tsarist Russia where Jews were restricted in settlement, education, and occupation and were at times victims of pogroms. The vision of the Christian faith, usually Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, or Roman Catholic in such areas was often that of a hostile oppressive religion. Some Jews would utter *shaketz teshaktzenu* (thou shall despise it) when passing a church. Yet for all its initial hostility and suspicion, the immigrant community was far from unanimous in opposing the missionaries. Its reaction was rather ambivalent, reflecting a great amount of self-interest as well as curiosity.

Needy immigrants often approached the missions as consumers of the various relief services the evangelizers provided. These services included medical clinics, English lessons for the newly arrived, sewing classes for women, and a variety of activities for children. Taking advantage of the help the missions offered did not necessarily imply any commitment or a desire to consider conversion. Many poor Jews believed that they could receive the help and remain immune to the missions' messages. Many of the newly arrived immigrants also came to hear missionaries preach or to visit the missions' reading rooms. Both missionary and Jewish sources as well as the general press report that young Jews would go by the hundreds at times to hear Christian missionaries preach.³ This involvement also did not necessarily imply a tendency toward conversion. The missions were part of the scenery of the Jewish neighborhoods and many of the newly arrived explored the missions and their messages as part of their encounter with their new environment and its opportunities. Once their curiosity was satisfied they usually ceased visiting the auditoriums where the preaching took

place. The general trend for the younger generation of immigrants was to Americanize as Jews. Very few chose to convert.

Perhaps unexpectedly, members of the Jewish elite were most troubled by the missionary presence. The German Jewish community was by the turn of the century well established socially and economically, much more at home in America than their east European brethren. It was precisely because of that reality that the Protestant evangelization attempts alarmed that prosperous group of Jews. The Jewish elite saw evangelization as a threat to their status as equal American citizens, with the right to retain their religious persuasion and yet be accepted as respected members of the American community.⁴ Jewish leaders and activists who came from that group resisted the missionaries' work, seeing their struggle as a fight for Jewish dignity and equality. Jewish American leaders regarded the missions' activity as an indication that Christians did not respect the Jewish religion or believe it could offer spiritual meaning and moral guidance to its adherents. It was further an indication, in their eyes, that Christians did not recognize the right of the Jewish nation to exist. Missionary enterprises, they contended, were consistent with the traditional Christian view that Jews were a people who long ago should have realized the supremacy of the Church over the Synagogue and dissolved into the Christian nations. Largely unaware of the missions' more appreciative attitudes toward the Jews, they regarded the attempt to evangelize them as the result of centuries-old hatred and rejection.

It was, therefore, not surprising that leading opponents of the missionary movement came from the ranks of the well-established German Jewish elite, often members or leaders of the Reform movement in American Judaism. It was Jacob Schiff, the noted financier and philanthropist from New York, a German Jew and member of a Reform synagogue, who helped finance Adolph Benjamin, a lifetime activist, in his campaign against the missionaries.⁵ Schiff and his social circle were almost never exposed to missionary propaganda, but he obviously considered the antimissionary activity a worthy cause.

The Reform leadership was particularly sensitive to the evangelization efforts. Perhaps the most noted and aggressive antimis-

sionary spokesman during the late nineteenth century was Isaac M. Wise (1819–1900), an architect of Reform Judaism in America. Wise's activity in this area began before the resurgence of the movement to evangelize the Jews in the 1880s. The scope of the missionary activity from the 1850s through the 1870s was much smaller, and Wise gave personal attention to almost every missionary and every Jewish convert who became engaged in Christian activity. He continued his vigorous antimissionary campaign well into the 1890s. His sarcastic style found full expression in his attacks on missionaries and converts.⁶ "The proselytizing fury is an outrage on religion, is a blasphemy on the Most High, a curse to the cause of humanity, hence the reverse, the direct opposite, of true religion," he bitterly complained.⁷

Some Reform leaders, such as Isaac M. Wise, looked down on evangelical Christianity, considering it much inferior to their own enlightened form of pure, rational monotheism. Reform Judaism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had built a triumphalistic Jewish theology, which presented Judaism as the leading moral force in the building of the modern world and as the religion of the utopian future toward which the world was progressing.⁸ For these Reform leaders, the missionary endeavor was particularly irritating. An attempt to evangelize the Jews cast doubt on their self-image as an elite class, the "Brahmins" of the new age. In addition, they believed that Reform Judaism provided Jews with an ideology that allowed them to retain their Jewish identity and also participate in the American commonwealth as full citizens. The evangelical message asserted that good citizens and constructive members of society were only those who had undergone a conversion experience and accepted Jesus as their personal Savior. Reform Jews felt that evangelical missionary efforts were a challenge to their secure position in society and to their status as middle-class Americans.

Perhaps not surprisingly, missionaries for their part took a very negative attitude toward Reform Judaism. They recognized that this group of Jews had become comfortable, well-to-do, and influential, more so even than most evangelicals. They were living proof that Jews could find their way into American society and be accepted without embracing Christianity. Missionaries sometimes pointed

to the unfortunate situation of the Jewish people throughout the ages, ascribing it to their stubborn refusal to accept Christ.⁹ But the German Jewish community in America was doing extremely well, a reality that touched upon a sensitive evangelical nerve since it exposed the inability of conservative Protestants to impose their values on the entire society and turn America into a "righteous kingdom."¹⁰ Reform Jews, like their progressive Christian counterparts, and like many liberal Jews and non-Jews, demonstrated by their successes that evangelicals, with all their vigor, had not won the day. In addition, many evangelicals found the concept of "Reform Judaism" strange and even irritating. Judaism for them was monolithic and static; it could not reform without the acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Reform movement was a hollow pretense, they thought, a rebellious attempt on the part of obnoxious people. Some missionaries labeled Reform Judaism "deformed."¹¹ Evangelicals portrayed Reform Jews as fallen people who walked in the darkness of Satan. Inasmuch as God did not seem to have punished these Jews in this era, He was no doubt going to do so in the next one. Reform Jews had no chance of survival.¹²

In addition to their resentment over missionary activity, Reform Jews found themselves on the defensive, facing attacks by Orthodox Jews who blamed the Reform movement for Jewish apostasy and conversions out of the faith. One such attack came from Britain's Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz, who pointed to the conversion of three graduates of the Hebrew Union College as a proof that the Reform ideology led to apostasy.¹³ Reform leaders found it necessary to defend themselves. Gotthard Deutsch, a professor at the Hebrew Union College, wrote to repudiate Hertz's claims. The three Reform Jews who converted to Christianity, he claimed, came from Orthodox homes and had Orthodox upbringing. Deutsch moved to list names of prominent Orthodox converts to Christianity. Attempting to put the blame at the Orthodox door, Deutsch then claimed that it was the inability of Orthodoxy to provide answers and meaning that turned Jews away from the faith. "If Orthodoxy cannot prevent the next generation from being non-observant Jews or Reformers—and it evidently cannot—is not Orthodoxy responsible for the apostasy of the next generation, if such occurs?" he asked.¹⁴

Orthodox and Reform Judaism would have been on less than

agreeable terms without the missionary presence, but the latter added to the ill feelings and mistrust. Rabbi Hertz's opinion was not unique; Orthodox Jews blamed conversion to Christianity on the turning away from "Observing Torah and *Mitzvot* (commandments)." If Jews adhered to their old religion they would have been immune to the seductions of other religions. Strengthening the Orthodox educational system was their proposed remedy to the missionary threat. "The only way to counteract the pernicious influences of the hypocritical missionaries," claimed Rabbi Mordecai Aaron Kaplan of the Lower East Side, was by "the establishment of Talmud Torahs (religious schools for children) and Synagogues."¹⁶

At times spokesmen for the Jewish elite made an effort to persuade the Christian community, on moral grounds, that proselytizing Jews was inherently wrong.¹⁷ Jews could not understand why otherwise honest, intelligent Christians should support and, worse still, be involved in evangelizing Jews. Perhaps if they were told how the Jews felt about the matter they would give up on missionizing. The Jews who had been noted in the New Testament to be a proselytizing people (Mat. 23:15) had ceased evangelizing altogether in the early Middle Ages as a precondition for living as a tolerated minority in Christian and Muslim lands.¹⁸ Conversions to Judaism were reduced to a minimum as they often posed danger to both converts and community and were reserved to extraordinary cases of people who knocked hard on the door and proved their sincerity beyond all doubt. Necessity turned into virtue, and nonproselytizing became a characteristic of the Jewish religion. Jews, who considered their religious heritage a part of their ethnic and cultural identity, could not understand why Christians could not leave them alone and evangelize in their own quarters only. Jews, including educated ones, were ignorant of the characteristics and motivation of evangelical Christianity. Needless to say, when Christians who supported or were involved in proselytizing Jews were confronted with the Jewish arguments against missionizing, they were not persuaded. They knew ahead of time that Jews would resent the attempts to evangelize them and would misinterpret their meaning. They were about to evangelize Jews whether the Jewish community liked it or not.¹⁹ From their perspective, evangelism was legitimate and propa-

gating Christianity among the Jews was an act of goodwill and kindness.

Jewish leaders did not object to evangelists working to bring Christianity to the down and out in the non-Jewish population, but Jews, they stated, were not in need of the Christian message. They had their own religious tradition, which offered them all that they needed spiritually and morally. The missionary endeavor was thus an insult and a cause for indignation. "I can understand and I can appreciate it when you and those like you go among the drunkards, the thieves, the harlots, and the lost classes of our population and try to redeem them. I cannot understand it that you should think the Jews of Chicago to be not better than thieves. We 'damned Jews,' we thank you for your good opinion of us," wrote in 1891 Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal of Zion congregation in Chicago to William Blackstone, founder and superintendent of the Chicago Hebrew Mission.²⁰ The most common method Jewish leaders used in their struggle was to try to discredit the missionaries and converts on moral grounds. Jewish opinion of both proselytizers and proselytized was indeed very poor. Just as decent people did not set out to induce Jews to abandon their fathers' faith, so sane and loyal Jews would never convert to Christianity. Deceit was the only means by which missionaries could make their way into the Jewish community.²¹ The antimissionary crusaders wanted to share their impressions with the general public and stir public ire against the missionaries. Remarkably, Jewish antimissionary activists approached the Christian evangelical community and shared their accusations against missionaries. In some cases they succeeded in convincing Christian supporters and cast doubt upon the integrity of some missionaries.²² But these cases were rare. More often than not little attention was given to such accusations. Supporters of the missions expected Jews to blame the evangelists (and the converts they made) and ascribe bad qualities to them.

Jewish antimissionary writers often described missionaries as swindlers and impostors. They accused missionaries of fabricating their personal histories, providing exaggerated accounts of their successes, using dishonest methods to bring Jews to hear the gospel, buying off converts, and embezzling the missions' assets and giving false financial statements.²³ Some of the accusations

sound almost unbelievable. If we were to accept Jewish reports, for example, then Leopold Cohn, founder and director of a Baptist-sponsored mission in Brooklyn, was not the former rabbi that he claimed to be but rather a runaway crook; when he posed as penniless and appealed for financial support, he actually held considerable property and was using donations for personal gain that had been given to him for the mission.²⁴ Jewish critics of mission activity were quick to point out that prominent converts were often presented as former rabbis, even if they had never been officially ordained.²⁵ The conversion of rabbis obviously filled missionaries with great satisfaction and they boasted of such incidents with pride.²⁶ Jews, for their part, were terribly embarrassed when rabbis converted and contended that many who claimed to be rabbis were not fully ordained. There were, of course, a few cases of fully ordained rabbis converting to Christianity. Others had served, prior to their conversions, as *hazan-shochet* (cantor-ritual slaughterer) or *shatz-matz* (cantor-teacher), which meant that they held semirabbinical positions in small Jewish communities. Although Jews often accused them of being impostors, their claim to the rabbinate was not completely unfounded.²⁷

Jews rarely questioned the personal integrity of non-Jewish missionaries; they mostly directed complaints at Jewish converts who had become engaged in evangelization work. Jews reacted much more negatively toward Jewish converts involved in proselytizing than toward non-Jewish missionaries. Gentiles could be expected to evangelize Jews but Jewish missionaries were seen as traitors twice over. Not only had they defected from the Jewish camp, but they had also joined the enemies in their struggle to destroy the Jewish faith and Jewish national existence. They were bound to be villains.

There was a certain irony in the attitude of Jewish opponents of missionary activity toward the propagation of Christianity among Jews. On the one hand, Jewish leaders like Wise rejected the evangelical impulse on the grounds that it implied intolerance of Judaism and endangered the social and political status of Jews in the American commonwealth. On the other hand, they were unwilling to recognize the right of evangelicals to preach their message among Jews, or the freedom of Jews to freely choose their religious belief. Reform Judaism differed on many issues with traditional Jewish atti-

tudes, but in this realm Reform rabbis manifested the traditional Jewish response, asserting that Jews had an inherited, indelible commitment to their religion. They could not walk away from it; their Jewishness was not a matter of choice. The United States was a free country in the sense that Jews were granted full civil liberties and had an equal status in the community, but not in the sense that they could choose their religious affiliation. Non-Jews were free to do so but not Jews.

Members of the German Jewish elite were not the only ones who tried to fight missionaries; some initiatives also took place in the immigrant neighborhoods, where reaction to the missionaries was far from being unanimous. A glimpse into conflicting Jewish attitudes was provided by an article in *the American Hebrew*, the writer of which described the following:

The missionaries have been active for some years in the neighborhood of Park avenue and 102nd street. A church there devoted to their uses is well lit up with electric lights and kept warm in winter, and with lectures and entertainments the children of the neighborhood are inveigled into attendance. Even a Jewish religious school has been maintained by them at times. Self-respecting people of the neighborhood have at different times taken the matter in their own hands and threatened to withdraw their trade from the Jewish butcher, baker, etc., who permitted their children to attend and take advantage of their outings, vacations, parties and treats. These tradesmen pleaded that no harm could come to their children, who needed the clothing and gifts they got, that the place kept them off the street, etc. It developed later unfortunately that the butcher, baker, etc., were held in the grasp of the missionaries by being allowed to hold services on the holidays for their own private use, which netted quite a penny to them and the pity is that they could not see the sinfulness of utilizing the missionaries' church with its crosses upon the seats and elsewhere, for petty gain.²⁸

The passage betrayed an elitist, condescending tone toward butchers, bakers, etc." Yet it revealed clearly the realities of Jewish coop-

eration with and resentment toward the missions. It explained why working-class Jews, themselves attached to Jewish tradition, allowed their children to attend activities sponsored by missionaries. As the report demonstrated, the parents did care about Jewish tradition; they were in fact observant Jews. But they did not think the missionary message could affect their children very much and the services the mission was offering their children outweighed the danger of their becoming Christian. The article in the *American Hebrew* demonstrated the fact that the mission offered things the children could not always obtain elsewhere. It pointed to differences of class and opinion in the immigrant community. "Self-respecting people of the neighborhood" resented the more popular approach, which was willingness to accept benefits from the missions under the assumption that "no harm could come to our children." Part of the Jewish reaction was an attempt to address the lack of sufficient facilities for Jewish youth.²⁹

Jonathan Sarna, who examined the Jewish reaction to Christian missionaries in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century, has argued convincingly that missionary activity spurred American Jews to organize and build educational, cultural, medical, and charitable enterprises, which were intended among other things to neutralize similar services the missionaries offered the Jewish populations. Jewish leaders and benefactors were both embarrassed and worried by the help provided by missionaries. This reality was undeniably true in the earlier period of missionary activity in the United States (1820s–1870s) with which Sarna deals:³⁰ By the 1880s–1890s American Jewry had developed a network of educational, medical, and charitable organizations that were reinforced in order to offer help to the Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe who were pouring into American cities in unprecedented numbers.³¹ In addition to having an earnest desire to help their needy brethren, the more established Jewish elite that sponsored the philanthropic initiatives was also motivated by the desire to help the newly arrived integrate into American society. The need to "do something," lest the missionaries use the unfortunate conditions of poor Jews to capture their souls, was a secondary consideration during that period. All that one could point to, for the years 1880 to 1910, as Jewish efforts to fight the missionaries

by offering similar services are educational initiatives, many of which were occasional and on a small scale. These initiatives included such ventures as an Orthodox group raising money to complete the establishment of a Talmud Torah by making a claim to its effectiveness in combating missionary efforts, or a group of Jews on New York's West Side deciding to conduct educational work among the area's children as a means to counterbalance missionary work among poor Jewish youth.³²

The aggressive missionary enterprises left their mark on Jewish perceptions of Christian attitudes toward Jews. Many in the Jewish immigrant community became suspicious of Christian charitable, welfare, or educational enterprises and at times were convinced that any Christian willingness to show goodwill toward the Jews was motivated by a hidden missionary agenda. Such was the case with Jacob Riis, a journalist, photographer, and urban reformer who wrote about the immigrant Jewish community of New York.³³ Riis's photographs, which reveal the poverty and deprivation on the Lower East Side of New York, can well explain why so many in the community were willing to use the services the missions were offering.³⁴ Riis's attempt at carrying out urban reform work in the poor Jewish neighborhood did not always meet with approval.³⁵ Riis was not a missionary and did not hold to a premillennialist-dispensationalist worldview. His perspective was that of a progressive elitist, patronizing perhaps, but not conversionist. Indeed, he expressed appreciative opinions of Jews and stated that they did not need to abandon their religion.³⁶ The urban reformer befriended Stephen Wise, a Reform rabbi and an active opponent of missionaries, and invited him to speak in the tenement center he operated in the Lower East Side. Yet poor Jews, newcomers to American society who rarely encountered members of the American Christian elite, could not figure Riis out. After all, what was a Christian do-gooder doing in a Jewish neighborhood? Unfamiliar with Riis's social and cultural background they could not grasp his motivation. Considering the resentment that Christian missionary "intruders" aroused among many Jews, it was not surprising that Riis encountered suspicion.³⁷

Although Jews did not always realize it, the missionary community did not remain indifferent to the Jewish opinion. Missionaries

took notice of the Jewish accusations, and their awareness of it often shaped the mission's rhetoric, which argued with the Jewish claims. Many among the mission's supporters and leaders became increasingly aware of the bad reputation the missionary endeavors acquired in the Jewish quarters and were afraid that it could affect their evangelization work among the Jews. Among other things, the missionaries discussed the Jewish accusations and asked themselves what steps they should take to eliminate the possibility of such accusations.³⁸

The fact that many in the immigrant community came to hear missionaries and use their services did not mean that opposition did not occur in the poor neighborhoods. On the popular level, immigrant Jews whom missionaries evangelized occasionally harassed missionaries, called them names, interrupted their services, and tore up their tracts.³⁹ These were for the most part spontaneous outbursts. Such actions, however, had little success in stopping the missionaries from carrying out their work. Missionaries knew that some amount of animosity on the part of individual Jews was inevitable and they were ready to face it.⁴⁰ They saw such unpleasant occurrences as a manifestation of ingratitude and evidence of the spiritual blindness that afflicted Jews. Yet they were certainly not discouraged. For some missionaries such negative reaction gave more meaning to their work. It proved that their work made a strong impact in the Jewish community, so much so that it aroused anger and opposition. They advertised the incidents in the mission's journals. It served as a proof of their dedication and evidence of the difficulties they were facing. If anything, such harassment served, in a twisted way, to boost missionary morale and strengthen the missionary cause in the evangelical community.

Some Jewish activists published guidebooks for Jews, offering answers to some of the arguments used by the missionaries. One such book was Lewis A. Hart's *A Jewish Response to Christian Evangelists*.⁴¹ Hart wished to provide his readers with the Jewish interpretations of passages from the Hebrew Bible with messianic overtones that missionaries used to persuade Jews that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. He wanted to provide Jews with arguments of their own to counter the Christian claims. The author was aware that many of the young Jews who were approached by missionaries, were puz-

zled by the Christian interpretation of certain biblical passages. He believed that their resistance to the Christian message would be strengthened by acquainting them with traditional Jewish interpretations that could be used as counterarguments.

Hart's book, which included extensive quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, is reminiscent at times of the medieval Jewish-Christian debates in which the Jewish spokesmen responded to and tried to repudiate the Christian typological reading of the Bible as a prelude to the New Testament. *A Jewish Response to Christian Evangelists*, as well as similar guidebooks for Jews, was based on the rather naive assumption that young Jewish men and women would read the book even before they encountered missionaries and heard their message, or immediately after such a meeting took place. It was further based on the idea, just as naive, that missionaries convinced Jews to embrace Christianity by concentrating on biblical exegesis. Discussing key biblical passages and their meaning occupied undoubtedly an important part in the dialogue between missionaries and prospective converts. It was, however, only one aspect and not necessarily the central one in a much more complicated process of interaction between evangelists and would-be converts. Other factors played an important role, including the converts' quest for meaning and community in their lives.⁴² It is doubtful, therefore, whether a decision for or against the acceptance of Christianity depended on reading the counterarguments that guides like this offered.

Hart was not alone in writing books to combat missionaries. A number of other community leaders wrote tracts that were intended to give expression to the Jewish opinion on the Christian missionary enterprise. Such publications did not necessarily provide a guide to Jews considering the missionary biblical exegesis but often served as an apologia for Judaism, listed the Jewish objections to the missionary activity, and offered an opportunity for the authors to let off steam. It is doubtful whether such books had any influence on Jews considering conversion. Missionaries definitely did not reverse their policy and cease evangelizing on account of reading such expositions. Yet such books give evidence of the Jewish perception of their own tradition. They also demonstrate the pain the missionary offensive caused. Remarkably, the authors of

such apologies came from the leadership of the Reform movement. Louis Weiss, a rabbi in Columbus, Ohio, published *Some Burning Questions: An Exegetical Treatise on the Christianizing of Judaism*.⁴³ In the same year another rabbi in the Midwest, Bernhard Felsenthal of Chicago, published *Why Do the Jews Not Accept Jesus as Their Messiah?*⁴⁴ Defending the right of Judaism to exist alongside Christianity, both writers expressed the standard Jewish perception regarding religious affiliation. In their view, those raised as Christians should be Christian whereas those raised as Jews should remain Jewish and should not be exposed to Christian evangelism, which the two rabbis saw as a destructive intrusion.⁴⁵ The midwestern rabbis demonstrated some of the misunderstanding between Christians and Jews over the issue of evangelism. For Jews, religious affiliation was intertwined with their ethnic identity and was determined at birth. For evangelical Christians, the definition of a Christian was a person who had undergone a conversion experience and had accepted Jesus as his or her personal Savior. They were unwilling to restrict the work of propagating the gospel exclusively to people who grew up in Christian homes. Moreover, as far as they were concerned, evangelizing the Jews was a sign of goodwill toward them.

The turn of the century witnessed a large Reform apologetic and polemic literature that was intended to defend Judaism.⁴⁶ Much of that literature did not relate to evangelical Christianity and missionaries. Instead it reacted to nonproselytizing liberal forms of Christianity and came to explain to Jews who at times were attracted to such religious communities why Christianity was not in any way superior to Judaism. Weiss and Felsenthal echoed some of these arguments, yet their books were not part of the genre because they were designed to counterattack missionaries and not Unitarians or Quakers.

A rather unusual literary treatment of converts to Christianity was provided by Abraham Cahan, the prominent Jewish journalist, whose writings dealt with the new realities and dilemmas of Jewish immigrants in America. In "*The Apostate of Chego-Chegg*" (1899) Cahan describes the travails of Rivka, alias Rebecca, alias Michalina, a *meshumadeste*, a convert to Christianity, and a new immigrant to America who joins a new agricultural village in Long Is-

land.⁴⁷ Rivka's conversion in Cahan's story had nothing to do with religious beliefs; she embraced Christianity in order to marry a man she loved. But her relationship with her husband did not replace the close family ties she was privileged to have had before her marriage. She becomes lonely and isolated and yearns for the warmth and support her former Jewish environment had provided her before her conversion. She begins an emotional, social, and geographical journey home to her family and religion. But her love for her husband does not allow her to settle back down with her family. She is again on the road, miserable, restless, and devastated. Although Cahan portray his fictional heroine with sympathy and compassion, he nonetheless describes her as a torn, tormented person, a lost soul. Cahan, a secular socialist, followed the traditional Jewish outlook of the *meshumadim*, "the self-destroyed." In his description, which well reflected the popular Jewish outlook of the time, joining Christianity was merely a social decision, devoid of spiritual or theological persuasion. It was an unfortunate decision based on miscalculation, for the new environment could not offer the warmth, security and clear sense of identity the Jewish community offered. Converts were wandering souls rejected in one community and strangers in the other. Cahan's short story, originally published in a general American literary magazine, clearly revealed the resentment of Jews, including secular ones, toward apostates that was just as strong in America as in Europe. Jews in Cahan's story could neither understand the heroine's choice nor tolerate it and refused to relate to her again, unless she recanted. In their world a *meshumadeste* was what it literally meant: she was someone who destroyed herself.

A particularly sensitive issue for both the masses of Jewish immigrants and the Jewish elite was the evangelism of children. Jews felt particularly vulnerable because they considered children to be more "in danger" of being influenced by missionaries. In this case, too, the heated Jewish reaction could be misleading. Evidently, many in the immigrant community allowed their children to attend educational and recreational activities sponsored by missionaries, overlooking the evangelization agenda that sponsored such enterprises. For many Jewish children, using the missionary facilities meant merely that—using them, with no lasting effects on their religious persua-

sion and communal loyalties. Yet the Jewish community as a whole saw the evangelization of children and teenagers as an almost monstrous scheme. "Stealing Jewish Children," ran the title of an article on missionary work among Jewish youth in the usually calm the *American Hebrew*.⁴⁸ Jewish public opinion was stirred to action whenever a missionary attempt to convert teenage children was crowned with success and rumors were spread of pressures put on Jewish children to convert.

Such was the case when Esther Yachnin, a fifteen-year-old girl from New York, converted to Christianity in 1911, an event that became a *cause célèbre*.⁴⁹ Yachnin was baptized, without her parents' consent, at the Eighteenth Street Methodist Church, Brooklyn. Her baptism stirred so much antagonism on both popular and organizational levels that the Brooklyn Federation of Jewish Organizations called a protest meeting. Participants at the gathering demanded that the state of New York declare it illegal to proselytize children. Jewish attempted unsuccessfully to introduce a bill which would have made the proselytization of minors without the consent of parents a misdemeanor. Even in New York, where the Jewish population had considerable political influence, the legislature was not persuaded to pass such a law. Protestant influences were stronger and the evangelical freedom to propagate the gospel took precedence over the Jewish fear that its youth would be converted.⁵⁰

The inconsistency in the relationship with missionaries characterized not only the immigrant community but also the elite. Despite their resentment at attempts to evangelize their people, Jewish leaders did not refrain from cooperating with missionaries when they felt that it would serve the Jewish cause. Such an approach was evident in the relationship between the American Zionist leadership and William Blackstone, founder of the Chicago Hebrew Mission and one of the outstanding evangelical leaders at the turn of the century. The hope that a Jewish national home would be built in the Land of Israel was held both by evangelical premillennialists like Blackstone and by the Zionists. In 1891, Blackstone organized a petition to the president of the United States, Benjamin Harrison, urging him to convene an international conference of world powers that would decide to give Palestine

back to the Jews. In 1916, at the urging of the leaders of the Zionist Federation in America, Blackstone renewed his petition. Zionists like Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, Rabbi Stephen Wise, and businessman Nathan Straus considered Blackstone's efforts advantageous to the Zionist cause. They regarded him as a friend and overlooked his missionary intentions.⁵¹

Their resentment of the missionary enterprise led Jews to look cynically on conversions, regarding them as inherently insincere and most likely motivated by social and economic gains. Spiritual meaning or religious persuasion had nothing to do with it, they asserted.⁵² Jews, according to that view, converted either to escape their unfortunate condition and enjoy the security and privileges that the non-Jewish community could offer, or else to raise their social status, gain acceptance by circles that had been closed to them, and win new economic opportunities. In many cases, converts had merely been "bought out" by financial promises made by propagators of the Christian faith. "The majority of Hebrew Christians that fill the churches of the missionaries of this city are mostly subventioned legionnaires ... these renegade Jews are not worth the notice of self-respecting men," wrote Moritz Ellinger, the editor of the *Menorah*, the organ of the B'nai B'rith order.⁵³ Jews looked upon converts as the scum of the earth, the rotten fruit on the Jewish tree, picked by the enemies of Judaism, who were unable to reach any of the good fruit.⁵⁴ The idea that some converts might have been persuaded by the Christian message and had embraced Christianity after much thought and inner struggle was a possibility their fellow Jews were often unable to countenance. That the missionaries perceived themselves as sincere friends of the Jews and saw their work as a manifestation of goodwill were concepts many Jews could not understand.

The Jewish response to the growing missionary activity was truly paradoxical. On the one hand, Jews portrayed attempts to evangelize them as complete failures. "We are no longer indignant. We have gone beyond that; we smile, pitying your fruitless efforts," wrote a Jewish activist in an open letter to a Christian leader whose church carried on missionary work.⁵⁵ Unacquainted with the ideology and motivation of the missionaries, Jews somewhat innocently assumed that the extensive missionary network that was operating to convert Jews and the zeal it displayed were aimed at the conver-

sion of the entire Jewish population. As such, they viewed it as a failure because only a relatively small number of Jews converted. At the same time, Jews vociferously condemned the missions' activities and carried out a propaganda campaign against them. If the missionaries were having such poor results, why give them so much attention and why bother to mobilize public opinion against them? The answer is that while Jews sincerely believed that Christian evangelization attempts were failing miserably, these efforts had nevertheless clearly touched sensitive Jewish nerves. As noted above, the fact that American evangelicals saw a need to Christianize the Jews was perceived as a signal of delegitimization, a denial of the legitimacy of Judaism as a separate religion and of the right of Jews to exist as a people with their own religious and cultural outlook. Missionary activity obviously stirred up old fears and frustrations, which resulted in a reaction that was disproportionate to the actual loss resulting from the missionary activity.

In the last analysis, it was more than anything else the belief that missionary activity posed a threat to their status in the American polity that stiffened the heated reaction to evangelization efforts. The Jewish elite and the newly arrived immigrants reacted differently. Yet both groups of Jews shared similar feelings about the missionaries. The elite felt that the missionary agenda and the beliefs it represented questioned the standing of Jews who had built a home for themselves in America and considered themselves to be among its proudest citizens. Many in the immigrant community sensed that missionaries represented an attitude that could stand in the way of their building such a home and attaining solid, respectable standing in the community. It was therefore no wonder perhaps that the Jewish attitude toward missionaries relaxed considerably in the 1920s and 1930s, when the Jewish community reached the conclusion that missions did not affect their position in the American polity and that the greatest dangers to their standing in that society came from other quarters.

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Notes

1. On the eastern European Jewish immigrants' life in America at the time see Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Knopf, 1976); Gerald A. Sorin, *The Jewish People in America, vol.3, A Time for Building, 1880-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Neil M. Cowan and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Our Parents' Lives: The Americanization of Eastern European Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
2. On the missionary activity in those years see David Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew* (New York: Jonathan David, 1978) 141-84; Daniel Joseph Ewearitt, "Jewish Christian Missions to the Jews, 1820-1935," Ph.D. dis., Drew University, (1988), 98-375; James Warnock, "To the Jew First: The Evangelical Mission to Jewish Immigrants, 1885-1915," Ph.D. dis., University of Washington, (1989).
3. For example, Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*, 168.
4. For example, Isaac M. Wise, *A Defence of Judaism versus Proselytizing Christianity* (Cincinnati: American Israelite, 1889); Stephen S. Wise, Introduction to Samuel Freuder, *My Return to Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1908).
5. Jonathan D. Sarna, "The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth Century Christian Missions," *Journal of American History* 68 (1981): 42.
6. For example, in I. Wise, *A Defence of Judaism*.
7. *Ibid.*, 8-9.
8. On Reform Judaism during the period see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity. A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), chaps. 6-7.
9. For example, William E. Blackstone, *The Heart of the Jewish Problem* (Chicago: Chicago Hebrew Mission, 1905), 16.
10. Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 155-83.
11. Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Conflict of the Ages* (New York: Our Hope, 1933), 147.
12. See Leopold Cohn, *To Both Houses of Israel* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Beth Sar Shalom, n.d.).
13. Quoted by Gotthard Deutsch in his response to Hertz's accusation. Gotthard Deutsch, "Has Reform Judaism Stimulated Apostacy" the *American Hebrew*, vol. 95, no. 12 (July 17, 1914): 307.
14. *Ibid.*
15. For example, "Want to Drive Out Missionaries?" the *American Hebrew*, vol. 92, no. 14 (January 31, 1913): 399.
16. "Jews Warned Against Missionaries," the *American Hebrew*, 92, no. 6 (December 6, 1912): 182.
17. See for example the exchange of letters between F. de Sola Mendes, rabbi of Shearith Israel in New York, and W.R. Huntington, rector of Grace Episcopal Church in New York, following the decision of the New York diocese of the

Episcopal Church to engage in missionary work among the Jews. "Missionary Work in New York," the *Menorah* 12, no. 5 (November, 1906): 250-251. Huntington replied to de Sola Mendes justifying the evangelization of the Jews. He argued that Jews were moving away from the religious beliefs of their parents, becoming agnostics, and that there was a rise in Jewish crime in New York. He further made the claim in line with the spirit of Jewish evangelism during the period that by converting the Jews he did not mean to gentileize them and that he showed sympathy to Jewish suffering.

18. On conversions to Judaism see, for example, Joseph R. Rosenbloom, *Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978).

19. See, for example, William Blackstone's reply to Rabbi Bernhard Felesenthal of December 8, 1891; copy in Blackstone's Personal Papers, at the Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Ill.

20. Felsenthal's letter to Blackstone, October 16, 1891, in Blackstone's Personal Papers.

21. This is an underlying assumption in a number of Jewish publications. For example, Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*, or Freuder, *My Return to Judaism*.

22. See a letter-pamphlet written and circulated by Alexander S. Bacon, a Baptist lawyer from New York, dated July 12, 1918, and addressed "to the Moderator and Members of the Long Island Baptist Association." Copy in the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

23. For example, Freuder, *My Return to Judaism*; Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*; see also Max Eisen, "Christian Missions to the Jews in North America and Great Britain," *Jewish Social Studies* 10 (1948): 31-72.

24. Freuder, *My Return to Judaism*, 160-70; Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*, 172-76; Eisen, "Christian Missions to the Jews," 35. Cohn's name does not appear in a book containing a list of the rabbis who functioned in Hungary, but this of course, could be a consequence of his being ostracized by the rabbinical world from which he emerged. P. Z. Schwartz, *Schem Hagdolim* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: "Jerusalem" Publishing, 1959).

25. For example, Freuder, *My Return to Judaism*; Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*.

26. For example: George Benedict, *Christ Finds a Rabbi* (Philadelphia: Bethlehem Presbyterian Church, 1932); Max Wertheimer, *From Rabbinitism to Christ: The Story of My Life* (Ada, Ohio: Wertheimer Publications, 1934).

27. After the conversion of Abraham Jaeger to Christianity, Isaac M. Wise, who had previously supported him and helped him obtain a position as a rabbi, turned against him and declared that "It is not true that Mr. Jaeger is or ever was a rabbi..." *American Israelite*, July 12, 1872: 8.

28. *American Hebrew*, 91, no. 22 (Sept. 27, 1912): 617.

29. "West Side Organization to Oppose Missionaries," *American Hebrew*, 95, no. 8 (June 19, 1914): 219; "Want to Drive Out Missionaries?"

30. Sarna, "American Jewish Response to Missions," 35-51; Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Impact of Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions on American Jews," In *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, edited by Todd Endelman (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1987), 232-54; George L. Berlin, *Defending the Faith: Nineteenth Century American Jewish Writings on Christianity and Jesus* (New Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989).
31. See, for example, Alexander M. Dushkin, *Jewish Education in New York City* (New York: Bureau of Jewish Education, 1918), 45, 53-54; Dushkin relates to educational organizations that were established as early as the 1830s and continued their work vigorously at the turn of the century.
32. Jeffrey S. Gurock describes the short-lived Jewish Centers Association, established in 1906, as aimed mainly at combating the missionary efforts. "Jewish Communal Divisiveness in Response to Christian Influences on the Lower East Side, 1900-1910," in Endelman, *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, 257; Gurock portrays Orthodox Jewish activists as standing in the forefront of antimissionary activity.
33. On Riis see James B. Lane, *Jacob A. Riis and the American City* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974); Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1884), 161-217.
34. See, for example, some of the illustrations in Rischin, *Promised City*.
35. Jeffrey S. Gurock, "Jacob A. Riis: Christian Friend or Missionary Foe?" *American Jewish History* 71 (1981): 29-48.
36. On Riis and the Jews see Louis (Lewis) Fried, "Jacob Riis and the Jews: The Ambivalent Quest for Community," *American Studies* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 5-24; Richard Tuerk, "Jacob Riis and the Jews," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (July 1979): 179-201.
37. Gurock, "Jacob A. Riis."
38. See Samuel Wilkinson, "The Moral Defensibility of some of the Methods Employed in Jewish Missions," *Yearbook of the Evangelical Missions Among the Jews*, vol. 1, ed. Hermann L. Strack (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1906), 60-67.
39. See for example "Jews Mob a Mission," *American Hebrew*, 89, no. 18 (September 1911): 531; "Raiding the Missionaries," 617, describes a more premeditated attempt at disrupting a missionary service. See also "Working Against Missions," *American Hebrew*, 92, no. 9 (December 27, 1912): 264, which describes picketing of a mission.
40. For example, Albert E. Thompson, *A Century of Jewish Missions*, 45; "Builders of Israel or Anti missionaries," *Prayer and Work for Israel* 7 (1916): 7-10; O. F. Hinz, "Some Discouragements in Jewish Mission Work," *Prayer and Work for Israel* 9 (1918): 183-84.
41. Lewis A. Hart, *A Jewish Response to Christian Evangelists* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co. 1906).
42. On the interaction between evangelists and prospective converts see Lewis R.

Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

43. Louis Weiss, *Some Burning Questions: An Exegetical Treatise on the Christianizing of Judaism* (Columbus, Ohio, 1893).

44. Bernhard Felsenthal, *Why Do the Jews Not Accept Jesus as Their Messiah?* (Chicago: Bloch and Newman, 1893).

45. Weiss, *Some Burning Questions*, 12–15. Felsenthal, *Why Do the Jews Not Accept Jesus?* 3–6.

46. Berlin, *Defending the Faith*, 45–75.

47. Abraham Cahan, "The Apostate of Chego-Chegg," *Century Magazine*, 59 (1899): 94–105.

48. "Stealing Jewish Children," *American Hebrew*, 78, no. 22 (October 16, 1903): 705–6.

49. Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*, 171 and 182–83; Gurock, "Jewish Communal Divisiveness," 257.

50. See "Jewish Bill Against Missionaries," *American Hebrew*, 89, no. 3 (May 19, 1911): 87. The article quotes non-Jewish resentment of the bill.

51. Yaakov Ariel, "William Blackstone and the Petition of 1916: A Neglected Chapter In the History of Christian Zionism in America," *Studies In Contemporary Jewry* 7 (1991): 68–85.

52. Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew*, 143; Arthur U. Michelson, *From Judaism and Law to Christ and Grace* (Los Angeles: Jewish Hope Publishing House, 1934), 82–83.

53. Moritz Ellinger, "Editorial," *Menorah* 14, no. 5 (May 1893): 320–23.

54. A striking example was Isaac M. Wise's rhetoric against converted Jews. Eichhorn, who records some of Wise's remarks, follows, to a large degree, in his footsteps.

55. "Open Letter to Bishop Greer," *American Hebrew* 99, no. 25 (December 27, 1916): 881.