Some Jews have chosen to disassociate from their inherited ethnoreligious culture for diverse reasons and in very different contexts over the past millennia. Todd M. Endelman demonstrates this perplexing but complex phenomenon in his recently published masterful and comprehensive volume. Effectively synthesizing historical research by scores of scholars in addition to his own impressive work, Endelman’s global narrative is both detailed and panoramic, portraying Jews who chose conversion or radical assimilation, or both, from the Middle Ages to the present day.

A number of draconian episodes in history decimated Jewish communities, such as the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions and the defeat of Muslim forces, leading up to the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. Christian triumphalism “seemed to some converts to prove the truth of the church’s claim that God had abandoned the Jews and consigned them to endless exile and punishment,” Endelman posits. The resulting almost complete lack of confidence in Judaism among many conversos changed the face of worldwide Jewry forever. While many Sephardic Jews who settled across the Ottoman Empire immersed themselves in Jewish religious as well as communal life and culture, former converts who made their way to Western Europe “attached themselves to the [Jewish] community for social and economic reasons primarily.” Some converted emigres in Amsterdam, London, and elsewhere “stood apart from the community altogether.” New Christians in Venice and Southwestern France “moved uneasily between Jewish and Christian communities” (see pp. 54–56 for these citations). In the aftermath of these cataclysms, Sephardic Jewry declined numerically worldwide and Ashkenazi Jewry rose proportionately.

Until the onset of modernity, it was seldom appropriate to consider pre-modern conversions “voluntary,” Endelman warns, because religiously neutral space was virtually nonexistent, and the “imbalance in power relations between Judaism and Christianity” was profound (p. 30). Some Jews switched religions reluctantly and sorrowfully, others eagerly, and still others out of fear or pragmatism; but religious and pragmatic motivations were typically entangled vis-à-vis the different impacting internal and external pressures. In most locales, desperately impoverished Jews were the most likely to convert to Christianity, while Jews of average or secure means and social status were much less likely to leave the fold. Records of conversions often refer to Jews in particularly miserable circumstances, including “battered women who were trapped in abusive marriages, . . . convicted criminals who were sentenced to die and wanted to save themselves, and beggars” (p. 31), who eked out a living by traveling from town to town and repeatedly converted to collect the fees the church offered to new immigrants.
In Catholic Poland and Italy, coercion continued from medieval through early modern times. In sixteenth-century Italy, onerous conditions for the Jews were exacerbated by the forceful spread of involuntary ghettos, further restrictions on Jewish economic activities, and repeat public burnings of the Talmud and other Hebrew books. Converts out of Judaism were primarily poor young men in their twenties, escaping these grim conditions; fewer poor women converted, some of them single/unmarried and some fleeing unhappy marriages to older Jewish men. Some converts to Christianity became priests or nuns, while others simply accepted clothing and money. In the early eighteenth century, the Polish church became interested in converting Jews, and religious institutions for that purpose were established. Tragically, they were to be filled by the “kidnapping of Jewish children.” Endelman details how “the children were subject to both the carrot and the stick, including flogging and starvation. Once [these] children submitted to baptism, parents were powerless to obtain their return” (p. 45). When Polish Jews experienced the cataclysmic Chemielnicki massacres in 1648, about 1000 of them converted to the Orthodox Church. Far greater numbers were slaughtered or enslaved. Memories of these hideous sufferings in the collective Jewish psyche were not unrelated to later crises of faith in the wake of the charismatic leaders Shabbetai Tsevi (1626–1676) and Jacob Frank (1726–1791), whose disastrous endings precipitated spasms of conversions among the community.

The Protestant Reformation did not produce a friendlier attitude toward Judaism, but it did precipitate newly energetic but less violently coercive approaches to conversion. Protestant leaders in seventeenth-century England and Germany and elsewhere in Northern Europe believed that converting Jews into their putatively purified Christianity would speed the Second Coming. Persuasion rather than coercion was utilized also because increasing notions of religious tolerance emerged from “the splintering of Christian unity and the inability of any one denomination to monopolize power,” Endelman notes (p. 33). Offers of education and employment were sweet enticements for Jewish baptism, and conversions increased somewhat. But the results were often disappointing; many converts discovered that their apostasy removed them from the Jewish community still without giving them viable economic tools or the social integration tools to survive in the Christian community. Moreover, because they had accepted economic enticements, the Christian community often suspected Jews of converting for impure motives. This pervasive mistrust was exacerbated by the continuing and understandably persuasive/intimidating practice of allowing condemned Jews to escape the gallows through conversion. As a result, even sincere converts often found that their professions of a newly embraced faith were “not as powerful as the negative sentiments about Jews that had accumulated over the centuries and become embedded in Western ways of feeling and thinking.” Despite their conversions, they continued to be considered Jews, and, thus, “the quintessential Other” (pp. 36–37).

Conversion to Christianity became attractive to broader segments of Jewish society in the eighteenth century as the ideals of the Enlightenment (the Age of Reason) began to emerge, and attempts at political emancipation of the Jews gained momentum: Jewish communities became modernized, Westernized, and secularized. But, that said, the likelihood of conversion differed significantly from country to country. In Western European Jewish communities like Holland, France, and England—and later America—Jews were relatively well-integrated. Many found that affluent, well-educated, ambitious Jews could progress tolerably as Jews, and rates of conversion remained low. However, in Russia, Hungary, Prussia, and Austria, where anti-semitic attitudes escalated, permeating society and cruelly restricting Jewish occupational and social upward mobility, progress was tantalizingly just out of reach and conversion often seemed the only answer.
Endelman describes how the distancing of Jews from their roots increased on immigrations to different countries:

Economic prosperity, immersion in Western culture, familiarity with non-Jewish society, and indifference to religious tradition were no longer the experience of the few. By the end of the [19th] century, Jews who were “candidates” for conversion—that is, who were susceptible to the attractions of shedding their Judaism by virtue of their social and economic position—numbered in the hundreds of thousands. As one Zionist writer in Vienna quipped in 1902, when a Viennese Jew reached his first hundred-thousand kronen, conversion became de rigueur (p. 90).

Quite realistically, these Jews viewed conversion as the necessary entrance ticket into the modern Western world, with all of its opportunities and advantages. Not surprisingly, under these conditions, youth and career ambitions were importantly connected to the likelihood of conversion. Large numbers of young men converted in order to get into universities or in order to obtain appropriate employment after completing their studies.

Young women converted too, often motivated by social ambitions or by individualistic yearnings for self-fulfillment. In some locales, women were numerically more likely to convert than men; for example, nearly two-thirds of Jewish converts to Christianity in Berlin from 1770–1805 were female. Endelman describes the larger patterns:

[W]omen were no more likely than men to leave the fold when their levels of acculturation and integration were similar. However, since notions of gender structured female education, work, and social interaction [had arrived,] . . . Jewish women experienced acculturation earlier than Jewish men, usually because they received little religious schooling, and their exposure to secular culture was not considered a threat to their faith (p. 134).

The intensity of Jewish religious experience in one’s life—or the lack of it—was connected to whether conversion was acted upon; those who did convert to Christianity were usually “the least firmly attached to Jewish practice or rooted in Jewish social networks” (p. 117). Endelman recounts particularly poignantly specific cases in prominent secularized Jewish families: “Simon Dubnov’s younger daughter Olga, swept up in the revolutionary events of 1905, fell in love with a Ukranian worker, . . . bore him twin sons, and then converted in order to marry him. While studying law at the University of Rome, Rachel Ginsberg, the daughter of Ahad Ha-Am (1856–1927), became the lover of a fellow émigré (p. 123).

Despite a rising number of converts, even secular families often followed the Jewish custom of cutting off children who defected to Christianity, sometimes leaving converts to comprise their primary social circles with other converts, since many Christians were not eager to socialize with former Jews. Indeed, as more Jews converted, their new Christianity was often regarded with increasing suspicion by their non-Jewish neighbors. Jewish “radical assimilation” (p. 171) often precipitated envy and opposition more intense than their traditional differences had aroused. Gradually, realizing that no matter how hard they tried to rid themselves of Judaic “defects” (p. 177), they continued to be disdained and many converts became deeply disillusioned. For some, this disillusionment was one more impetus for emigration to America.

Until contemporary times, even the most disparate motivations, contexts, and conditions usually produced very similar results—an estrangement from Jewish life for converts and their descendants. While the alternative religious identifications to which they fled or succumbed, usually, were not as hospitable to new converts as their threats or enticements had promised, the children or grandchildren of converts were typically deeply embedded in non-Jewish religious culture, society, and life in
general, with little consciousness of—and little interest in—their fading Judaic lineage.

This picture changes when Endelman brings his sweeping overview up to the present time, roughly in the middle of this volume. He discusses how, especially, in America, an “extraordinary shift in sentiment was made possible by the destigmatization of Jewishness, itself one part of a broader turn toward the toleration of difference and the emergence and validation of segmented forms of identity” (p. 214). Endelman dutifully presents both pessimistic and optimistic schools of sociological interpretation (p. 215), including the argument of some contemporary social scientists in the United States today who depart from prior historical understood patterns. Such observers point to dramatic levels of American-Jewish “pride” (p. 214), even among intermarried Jews who are not raising their children as Jews by religion. Their data show that adult children of intermarriage today who have some attenuated Jewish background—unlike most in the past—may be motivated to seek out and reclaim their Judaic heritage. However, Endelman demurs from the optimistic view: “As American Jews grew closer to other white middle-class Americans, the forces of secularization undermined their most distinctive traits—their religious customs.” He adds—foreshadowing his own later comments—“The only Western society in which a secular Jewishness was successfully transmitted over several generations was that which emerged in the twentieth century in the Land of Israel, because there alone Jews were no longer a minority” (p. 219).

Rather than moving directly from this depiction of contemporary Western environments to his concluding remarks, Endelman interposes several fascinating chapters on cases of Jewish converts who experienced spiritual life transformations and on the fate of Christianized Jews in the aftermath of their religious change. By inserting these, Endelman breaks his developed narrative momentum, which might have been interpreted as progress to a happy ending otherwise.

Instead, in his concluding chapter, Endelman characterizes his story as a “dispiriting tale” of “radical assimilation” (p. 365). He then sets a curious juxtaposition before his readers: Today, deeply ingrained essentialist anti-Semitic attitudes may have diminished, but they have not disappeared. They have, however, been reinforced by a deep-seated mistrust for Jewish nationalism and a profound negativity with which many academics and many liberals regard Zionism. In some Jewish circles, as well, it is normative to celebrate the creativity and “the resourcefulness of diaspora Jews,” but it is “wildly unpopular” to celebrate the Jewishness that emanates from the Jewish State or to suggest that the Jewish State and diaspora Jewry may at the very least depend on each other for Jewish vitality (pp. 360-67). After the massive evidence across history presented and Endelman’s assembly of the centuries-long attempts to make Jews into something other than Jews, some readers may feel challenged to probe whether negativity toward the very existence of the Jewish State is yet another essentialist hatred of things Jewish and the newest episode in the attempt to eradicate Jewishness.

REFERENCES

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