

FROM NECESSITY TO VIRTUE: THE HEBREW-CHRISTIANITY OF GIDEON R. LEDERER

JONATHAN D. SARNA

One of man's most valuable psychological defenses is his ability to make necessities into virtues. Poverty, illness and extraordinary pain can be endured by people who find meaning in their condition. Workers who believe their jobs to be important can perform menial repetitive tasks that no "unbelieving" worker ever would tolerate. Even large groups can withstand oppression if they view it as a test of their "chosenness." Today, psychotherapists and psychologists provide many people with the meaning which transforms necessities into virtues. Traditionally, however, this was a function of religion. Redemption and the promise of future reward made suffering in this world bearable. Belief allowed people to live happier and more fulfilling lives.¹

Hebrew-Christianity is a striking example of a religious movement which aimed to make a virtue out of necessity. Its members, usually first generation converts from Judaism, were lonely, marginal men. Christians viewed them as Jews; Jews viewed them as Christians. Full-fledged members of neither group, Hebrew-Christians set up a religious organization of their own. They developed an ideology in which they play a pre-eminent role. They justified their aloofness by pointing to their special status in God's millennial plan.²

In what follows, I shall track Gideon R. Lederer (1804-1879), forgotten forefather of the Hebrew-Christian church in the United States, along his trail from necessity to virtue. A convert, missionary and editor, Lederer wrote at length about Hebrew-Christianity. He

JONATHAN D. SARNA is Rapoport Fellow in American Jewish History, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹See Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York, 1962), and *The Unconscious God*. (New York, 1975).

²On Hebrew-Christianity, see Louis Meyer, "Hebrew-Christian Brotherhoods. Unions and Alliances of the Past and Present," *Minutes of the First Hebrew-Christian Conference of the United States* (Pittsburgh, 1903), pp. 16-28; Hugh J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (Bucksworth, England, 1936); H. L. Ellison, "The Church and the Hebrew Christians," in G. Hedenquist (ed.) *The Church and the Jewish People* (London, 1954), pp. 143-67; Ira Glick, "The Hebrew Christians: A Marginal Religious Group," in M. Sklare (ed.) *The Jews* (New York, 1958), pp. 415-31; B.Z. Sobel, *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe* (New York, 1974); and Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Hebrew Christianity: It's Theology, History and Philosophy* (Washington D. C., 1974).

helped to formulate the ideology which supported the movement well into the twentieth century.³

I

Gideon Robert Lederer was born in Pesth, Hungary in 1804. His grandfather was a rabbi, his father was a glazier, and he was a child prodigy - or so he claimed. Educated by two prominent Czech rabbis, Maier Glogau and Mordecai (Marcus Benedict) Benet, he became a rabbinic functionary in the area of his hometown. He abandoned this career, at the age of 25, in order to enter the world of business. Later rationalizations notwithstanding, he likely changed careers in order to earn a living wage.

As a businessman, Lederer was moderately successful. He soon developed close relations with non-Jews of his class. In 1841, probably at the instigation of these non-Jews, he encountered the first Protestant missionaries sent to the staunchly Catholic city of Pesth by the Church (after 1843, the Free Church) of Scotland. After a long inner struggle, he formally converted on June 15, 1842 (another source claims July 15, 1844).⁴

Lederer was only one of a large number of Pesth Jews to convert in the mid nineteenth century. Freed from all economic restrictions, the city's Jews had quickly grown wealthy and more secular. They became disenchanted with the traditional synagogue - to such an extent that a traveling missionary observed in 1840 "that no place could be better adapted for a Jewish mission." When the mission arrived, it attracted many inquiries - principally because the missionaries taught English. But English quickly gave way to other studies. Before long, the dignified Scottish Protestants were sending home triumphant letters about their "miraculous successes in the conversionist field. Hungarian Jews viewed Protestantism as a ticket to civility and success.⁵

The newly converted Lederer worked for several years as a colporteur for the Scottish mission. According to church records, his miss-

³There is no complete biography of Lederer. He is briefly mentioned in Meyer, "Hebrew-Christian Brotherhoods," pp. 24-27; A. E. Thompson, *A Century of Jewish Missions* (Chicago, 1902), p. 231; A. Bernstein, *Some Jewish Witnesses for Christ* (London, 1909), p. 330; Adolph Saphir, *Christ and Israel: Lectures and Addresses on the Jews* (London, 1911), p. 10; and David Max Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew* (Middle Village, New York, 1978), pp. 128-34 and *passim*.

⁴See items cited in n. 3, as well as *Israelite Indeed*, I (1857), pp. 138, 159; II (1958-9), pp. 4-6, 269; III (1859), pp. 8-13, 26-32.

⁵*Jewish Intelligence*, VI (1840), p. 278, cf. VIII (1842), pp. 338-40. See also, David McDougall, *In Search of Israel: A Chronicle of the Jewish Mission of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1941), pp. 23-69; and J. Ben David, "Beginning of Modern Jewish Society in Hungary During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," (Hebrew) *zion* XVII (1951-2), pp. 101-28.

ionizing activities met with a "friendly reception." But the 1848 revolution brought an end to missionizing, and ultimately forced Lederer to emigrate to England. From there, in 1854, he came to the United States.⁶

The new immigrant apparently had trouble finding a job. The Jewish community shunned him. The Christian community could offer him only the menial labor assigned to foreigners who barely knew English. The best Lederer could do, therefore, was to take a job as **missionary to the Jews**. After a short stint with the American Society for Meliorating the Condition for the Jews, he became the only missionary to the Jews ever employed by the New York City Tract Society (reorganized in 1866 as the New York City Mission and Tract Society)—a post he held until his death on February 25, 1879.⁷

The attitude of the Tract Society to its Jewish missionary is highly instructive. The society's reports referred to him as the "converted Jew" and dwelled on his past as much as on his present. Lederer was treated differently from gentiles. The society assigned him to work with Jews—exclusively. It never accepted him as a regular missionary. It left him in a nebulous region somewhere between Protestant and Jew.⁸

II

Lederer actively sought out the company of those who shared his marginal position. Such people understood him and accepted him wholeheartedly. They shared his past and his hopes for the future. They were his closest friends. Whether he realized it or not, Lederer spent most of his life trying to create more marginal men. Of course, this was not the justification for his conversionist activities. Nor did all converts become marginal. Some relocated, hid their past, and joined the mainstream. But marginality was the fate awaiting many converts—especially immigrants who revealed their original identities through their appearances and accents. Lederer undertook to convince these converts that their marginality—their unique blend of Jewish and Christian—placed them in a category among God's elect.⁹

⁶*Jewish Chronicle* (N.Y.), (1849), p.251 cf. p.29; *Israelite Indeed*, I (1857), pp. 45-7; II (1858-9), pp. 74-77, 122-25, 146-49, 170; IV (1860), pp. 54-55.

⁷*Jewish Chronicle* (N.Y.), X (1854), p. 254; *Israelite Indeed*, II (1859), pp. 170-71; XIII (1870), p. 254; *New York City Tract Society Annual Reports* (=NYCTSAR), XXVIII (1854), pp. 16-17; LIII (1879), p.16; Kenneth D. and Ethel Price Miller, *The People Are The City: 150 Years of Social and Religious Concern in New York City* (New York, 1962), pp. 70, 73.

⁸NYCTSAR, XXVIII (1854), p. 17; XXXIII (1859), p. 39; XXXVI (1862), p. 43.

⁹The classic work on marginality is Everett V. Stonequist, *The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Cultural Conflict* (New York, 1937); cf. Milton M. Goldberg, "A Qualification of the Marginal Man Theory," *American Sociological Review* VI (1941), pp. 52-58.

Lederer's most important conversionist tool was his magazine, *The Israelite Indeed* (from volume XI it was called *Nathaniel*; or *The Israelite Indeed*). The name was well-chosen. Jesus used the term "Israelite indeed" about Nathaniel, a convert from Judaism (John 1:47). Furthermore, *Israelite Indeed* was easily confused with the title of a Jewish newspaper, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise's *Israelite*. Lederer doubtless hoped that his *Israelite* would ultimately succeed in winning over the competition.

In early volumes, the *Israelite Indeed* courted a Jewish audience by publishing lengthy Hebrew quotations (with translations) designed "to show my Jewish brethren as well as to our brethren the Gentile Christians, that almost all the main doctrines of Christianity were believed and publically taught by Jewish rabbins." Most of the quotations came from codes and commentaries unavailable in the United States and unknown to a vast majority of American Jews. Lederer often quoted from memory—sometimes incorrectly. Yet, even if every quote had been accurate, the effort would not have borne fruit. The arguments might have proved effective among Talmudically versed Jews in Hungary, but in America where (to quote Isaac Mayer Wise) "ignorance swayed the scepter and darkness ruled," they were completely out of place.¹⁰

Polemics played a smaller role in Lederer's later volumes. Theodore Dwight,¹¹ nephew of Yale president Timothy Dwight, became co-editor of the *Israelite Indeed*, and transformed it into a journal designed "to arouse Christians to a more lively interest in Israel's sacred cause."¹² It assured sceptics (and reassured sympathizers) that Jews could and would be converted—an assertion that was backed up by missionary news and convert autobiographies. It described Jewish customs, habits and history, and kept readers abreast of current events. Most important of all (to Lederer if not to his readers) it contained pages on theology and eschatology. It sought to prove that the millennium was fast approaching, and that converts from Judaism would play a vital role in bringing it about. This, of course, was a prime justification for most missions to the Jews. In Lederer's hands however, it became a rationale for a separate and selfconscious Hebrew-Christian existence.

Lederer claimed to take literally all Jewish and Christian proph-

¹⁰*Israelite Indeed*, I (1858), p. 158, cf. pp. 38, 132, 138, 147; *Israelite*, IV (1857), p. 116; and Isaac M. Wise, *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati, 1901), p. 24.

¹¹"Dwight, Theodore," *Dictionary of American Biography*, V (1930), pp. 570-71; and Benjamin W. Dwight, *The History of the Descendants of John Dwight of Dedham, Ma.* (New York, 1874), pp. 21-32.

¹²*Israelite Indeed*, IV (1860), p. 28.

ecies regarding the end of days. He sided with pre-millennialists, and insisted that post-millennial "spiritualizers" of the biblical text were committing a "fatal error." He refused to speculate as to the exact date of the messianic coming, and he had no patience for those who did. Otherwise, he lustily debated even the small points of eschatological doctrine (would the temple be rebuilt and sacrifices be reintroduced?) with all who cared to write. He insisted that he would "argue with those who cannot 'see it'" until the bitter end, whether this cost him much-needed subscriptions (his circulation numbered less than 700) or not. The end came in 1871, when the *Israelite Indeed* ceased to appear.¹³

The basic tenet of Lederer's creed held that the "Gentile dispensation" was in its final period, and that with the reappearance of Christ on earth, "the house of Israel, or Jewish race, shall again occupy their own land, and hold the first place among the nations, under their proper King, the Son of David, forever." Converted Israelites were thus "pledge(s) of the final salvation of all Israel." They obviously had to maintain their identity as members of the Jewish nation. They had to remain aloof from gentiles. They had to maintain ties to their brother Jews. They had, in short, to become Hebrew-Christians.¹⁴

III

Lederer's millennial doctrine unconsciously justified the sociological situation which he faced since his conversion. Christians always considered him a Jew; as a Hebrew-Christian, he agreed—proudly. he looked down on "the specialities of Gentile Christian denominations," and declared himself a strict adherent of "Peter's creed." He attacked all "existing forms and substances" of Protestantism, and promised unification and reform once the "gentile dispensation" came to an end.¹⁵ Meanwhile, he defended his Jewish "kinsmen according to the flesh" when they faced Christian prejudice. He defended the Talmud against its most bitter critics. He even boasted of Jewish virtues (learning, piety, industry, financial acumen and hospitality to new ideas) which he thought that non-Jews might profitably emulate. He faced charges of "Judaizing heresies," especially when he admitted that he observed the first night of Passover as a holiday of the Jewish people. But he

¹³*Israelite Indeed*, V (1862), pp. 145-46; VIII (1864), pp. 82-5; XII (1868), pp. 121, 161; XIV (1870), p. 3.

¹⁴*Israelite Indeed*, VI (1863), pp. 226-8.

¹⁵*Israelite Indeed*, III (1860), p. 5; VIII (1865), p. 135; XIII (1869), p. 5; XIV (1870), p. 7.

cheerfully ignored critics. He had convinced himself that history would prove him correct.¹⁶

Of course, Lederer never denied that he was a Christian. Indeed, he wore the badge proudly. He missionized energetically all over New York's Jewish quarter, and claimed responsibility for at least sixty-nine conversions. He bitterly attacked the "absurdities and prejudice" allegedly found in rabbinic Judaism, and sadly told his Christian readers that "Jews are . . . enemies to Christ and hate with bitter hatred." He even carried on a prolonged debate with Isaac Mayer Wise, who called him an "arrogant and saucy ignoramus." In the end, however, Lederer had to admit that in America, Jews were unwilling "to listen to the messengers of their Messiah." But he still hoped that they would see the light. He felt that he could offer Jews more than either Judaism or Christianity taken separately. He offered Jews the opportunity to join a select group whose future was secure. He never understood why his Jewish brethren spurned him.¹⁷

Rejected by Jews and suspected by Christians, Lederer—in a reaction commonly found among stigmatized people all over the world¹⁸—undertook to prove that he and his "co-religionists" were distinctive and superior. He promoted "social intercourse among the Christian-Jewish brethren," hoping in this way to make them all conscious of their special identity. He played an active role in four short-lived efforts to unite Hebrew-Christians: The American Brotherhood (1859-60), The Hebrew Christian Brotherhood (1868). He even called for a separate Hebrew-Christian Church. He felt that those who like himself were pre-destined to play a leading role in the "final dispensation" should distance themselves from their gentile brethren, and support one another.¹⁹

These efforts to create a distinctive Hebrew-Christian cult failed, mainly because so many Hebrew-Christians served as missionaries, and were beholden to major denominations for their jobs. But what Lederer could not achieve in this world, he expected to see in the next. He was sustained by the hope that Hebrew-Christians, their

¹⁶*Israelite Indeed*, I (1857), pp. 3, 9, 10, 20, 115; II (1859), pp. 51, 182, 201, 271, 278; IX (1866), pp. 240-242; XII (1868), pp. 81-84.

¹⁷*Israelite Indeed*, II (1858), p. 125; IV (1861), pp. 160, 207; XIII (1870), p. 242; *NYCTsar*, 36 (1862), p. 43; *Israelite*, IV (1857), pp. 116, 228, 237.

¹⁸Among the vast literature on this subject, see David F. Alberle, "A Note on Relative Deprivation Theory as Applied to Millinerian and Other Cult Movements," in Sylvia Thrupp (ed.) *Millennial Dreams in Action* (The Hague, 1962), pp. 209-14; Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (London, 1968); and Joseph R. Washington Jr., *Black Sects and Cults* (New York, 1973). I am grateful to my friend, Robert Weisbrot, for bringing some of these works to my attention.

¹⁹*Israelite Indeed*, III (1860), pp. 190-191; (1866), pp. 7-9, 119; *Israelite*, I (1855), p. 369.

numbers greatly augmented by Jewish conversions, would achieve their promised glory and receive the spiritual compensation long due them. He felt sure that, ultimately, the marginal existence forced upon Hebrew-Christians in this world would be recognized as virtuous—and amply rewarded.