Apostasy and Jewish identity in High Middle Ages Northern Europe

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Over the course of the last two generations, thousands of people all over the world saw the musical Fiddler on the Roof, and at the end found themselves giving it a standing ovation, their eyes wet with tears. Everyone who saw it identified with the moving story of a middle-aged man who was forced to deal with the changes occurring in the world around him, as reflected in the lives of his daughters.

The musical Fiddler on the Roof is based upon the book Tevye der Milkhiker (‘Tevye the Milkman’), written by the Yiddish author Shalom Rabinowitz, better known by his pen name Shalom Aleikhem (‘peace upon you’), the greeting with which two Jews meeting one another identify as Jews. Rabinowitz was born in 1859 in the town of Pereyaslav in the Kiev district. In 1905, he immigrated to the New World; he died in New York City in 1916. From 1894 on he began to publish the adventures of Tevye the Milkman in serialized form and, for the rest of his life, never ceased to be engaged with this work, expanding it, and dealing with various questions related to its structure, characters, and plot.

Shalom Aleikhem’s Tevye was forced to deal with a new and changing world, and with his seven daughters, each one of whom challenged him with a truth of her own. The first preferred romantic love with a life of poverty to an arranged match without love to an established and wealthy husband; the second fell in love with a fearless Jewish revolutionary who tried to change society and ended up in a harsh and remote prison in Siberia where she, out of her intense love, joined him. The third committed suicide due to her love for a man who submitted to the pressures of society and cut off their romantic connection; while a fourth married a wealthy husband in order to help provide for her poor family.

But the heart of the story is doubtless Tevye’s confrontation with his
beloved daughter Chava, who fell in love with a Polish Christian, and married him in church, as a Christian, thereby abandoning her family, her religion, and her father who loved her like his own soul. The father, in a complex, touching, and tragic chapter, describes the affair, recounting his own attempts to return her to him and to her Jewishness in light of the priest’s joy at his ‘victory.’ When the dimensions of his theological failure as a father become clear to him, he carries out the ultimate act of the Jew, cutting himself off from Chava in a final and decisive manner. He declares his converted daughter to be dead, rends his garments, and sits shivah for her. ‘There is no Chava, Chava is dead,’ and goes on with his life.

At the end of the story it becomes clear to the Jewish family, who have lived their entire lives in a Christian village, that times have changed and that they are now to be expelled from the village. Tevye takes his family, his daughters, and grandchildren, and leaves the village forever. Thus are Jews expelled. Then, at the height of the drama of the expulsion, his Christian daughter Chava suddenly appears in their home to inform him that she is leaving everything and coming back to him, to be expelled along with him. A deep understanding of the reality of Jewish life in the world envelops both father and daughter. Chava realizes that the Jew always remains a Jew and cannot alter his religion for another, and that the Gentiles will never accept either the Jew who remains a Jew or the Jew who has converted to Christianity. Chava symbolizes the entire process through her very being. She took the Christian religion upon herself out of love for a Christian boy and became aware that her act is opposed to the way of the world. Now that the Jews are being expelled, as always by the Christians, she abandons her new religion and returns to the old one. Tevye learns what Rashi had stated centuries earlier: that a Jew, even if he becomes an apostate, remains a Jew. Despite what Chava said in church, despite her taking upon herself the principles of her new religion, her essence has not changed: she remains a Jew. Thus, the rending of the garments, the sitting shivah, and the recitation of Kaddish, did not nullify Chava’s life as a Jew, and she remained a Jew, stayed alive, and returned.

The scene in which Tevye confronts his daughter’s conversion to Christianity came from the very heart of the author, who returns to this episode repeatedly. Even while living in New York, he writes a play entitled Tevye’s Daughters, at whose climax he places the tragic religious confrontation between father and daughter. He rewrites this play twice, returning to this dramatic scene in the various corrections and additions he made to it. He writes of his hesitations and vacillations in a 1914 letter to his wife, as well as discussing the matter with the producers and actors who are to
appear on the stage in New York. He originally made Chava voice another explanation for her disappointment and her discovery of the true nature of the situation existing between Christians and Jews. In one version, Chava comes to the home of her sister Bielka who had married a wealthy Jew, whom she tells that she is leaving her Christian husband because he believes that her father needs holy Christian blood for the Passover holiday. Did the Beilis Trial of 1913 impress Shalom Aleikhem with the feeling that, even at the beginning of the twentieth century, Orthodox Russians believed in the anti-Jewish blood libel?

In any event, in the end the author preferred the original version, the one he had written at the outset. Chava returns to her father’s house before he leaves it forever, her older sister persuades the father to accept her back because she is his daughter, and the apostate daughter returns to her religion, to her family, and to her people. She returns to Jewishness by admitting that, at the time of her conversion in church she did not listen or relate to what was said and did not accept the basic principles of the religion or of baptism. She returns to her family by declaring that she is her father’s daughter as she was before. She returns to her people by sharing in the terrible Jewish experience of exile, loss, and wandering.

At the same time that Shalom Aleikhem was dying of tuberculosis in New York City in 1916 at the age of only fifty-seven, a four-year-old Jewish child was playing in the streets of the Bronx. This child was Joseph Stein, the son of parents who had fled from Poland to America, settled in New York, and established a family. Stein grew up in the Bronx and earned a master’s degree in social work. While pursuing his profession, he began to write plays and, in 1948, these began to appear on the Broadway stages. He achieved the height of his fame in 1964 when he reworked the story of Tevye the Milkman into the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The title (and backdrop) for this play were taken from Marc Chagall’s painting portraying a Jew floating above the earth, playing with great virtuosity on that wonderful musical instrument which it is possible to take everywhere, an instrument that can produce the most melancholy weeping sounds as well as the most joyous tones.

At the end of the musical as reworked by Joseph Stein, when it becomes clear to Tevye that they are being expelled from their town, his daughter Chava appears before him with her Polish Christian husband and tells him that they are leaving, as a couple, to go to the city of Krakow. She then adds a sentence, upon hearing which the audience in the theater begins to applaud: we are unwilling to remain in a place that could do such things to others. Tevye adds, ‘God be with you.’
Could Shalom Aleikhem have imagined that a Jew named Joseph Stein would erase the theological debate, the anger against those who abandon their people, and the wonderful insight regarding the inability of the Jew to change his religion—and for all these substitute the new sentence which he placed in Chava’s mouth? What would Shalom Aleikhem have thought if he knew that someone would change the climax of this story, into which he had put every fiber of his being, describing the modern Jewish tragedy and the ability of the Jew to rise like a phoenix, specifically in light of their repression by the Christian gentile?

The new Chava does not mention her Jewishness, nor does she leave her husband. She does not return to her people, nor to her religion or to her family. She declares that she belongs to a neutral and universal world of ‘good people,’ and that she, alongside her loving Christian husband, will set out on their journey together—and specifically to the city of Krakow. This is the manner in which American Jews prefer to resolve the theological confrontation articulated by Shalom Aleikhem one generation earlier.

The question as to how Jews regard one who has abandoned his religion and converted to another lies at the basis of the present study. The timeframe chosen relates to the Jewish confrontation with a changing Christian world in Europe, from the early Middle Ages until the mid-fourteenth century. The method of this research is socio-historical; hence, we have chosen those areas in which the Jews confronted Christians over a lengthy period of time. The study is focused upon France, Germany, and England until the great expulsions from these areas during the course of the fourteenth century (from England in 1290). The Jewry of Christian Spain is deserving of a study in its own right, as it was initially under Muslim rule and only later passed under Christian rule, so that the social structures created there were formed rather differently.

This study began with notes and insights that I received in response to my article published in *Annales* in 1999. All those insights I gained were renewed and expanded with the help of various different researchers who read my paper, and with the help of my students in a course on the subject which I gave every three years in the Department for the History of the Jewish People at Tel Aviv University. My experience regarding both this and other subjects confirms the saying of the Kabbalist R. Shmuel d’Ozidah concerning the concept of *talmidei hakhmamim* (the Hebrew term for scholars; literally, ‘student-sage’): ‘That it is never justified to call someone a “sage” or “wise man” alone, without adding the term “student”—for if he does not think that he is a student, he is not truly a sage.’ I wish to thank
all those who commented, criticized, and provided new insights, both researchers and students.

During the years 2005–6 I had the honor of being the guest of Claire Hall College in Cambridge, England. There I began to develop the ideas which are expanded in this research. I enjoyed numerous conversations on the matter of conversion with Miri Rubin as part of the ongoing project, ‘Religion and the State in Pre-Modern Europe,’ at the Centre for History and Economics in Cambridge. During that time I also took part in two conferences organized by the project which focused on the topic of conversion and which provided additional stimulus for my research. I am grateful for her willingness to answer all my questions, and for the many connections she helped me build with other scholars.

Yitzhak Hen contributed greatly to the quality of this study through his keen criticism and directed me towards much source material and research studies on conversion to Christianity. Yitzhak Lifschitz, with his insights into the halakhic approaches of the medieval scholars, clarified for me many of the complex halakhic issues and sources. Robert Chazan made many constructive comments.

Notes

1 There were twelve stage productions of Fiddler in the United States and Great Britain (1964–2007), which received three Tony Awards (Best Musical, Best Score, Best Book), as well a movie version (1971). The film won Academy Awards (for arranger-conductor, best picture, best actor, and best supporting actor).


4 Shemuel di Uzidha (Oceda), Midrash Shmu’el, on Pirkei Avot, Bene Berak 1988, beginning of chapter 4; or, in the words of Goethe, ‘Bonos vir semper tiro.’