Apostasy and Jewish identity in High Middle Ages Northern Europe

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Alternative perspectives:
The literature of pietists
(Ashkenazic hasidim)

The halakhic responses examined in the previous chapters are not only what is required for a discussion of the issue of self-definition. From a methodological viewpoint, we also need to examine issues and attitudes pertaining to mentalities that are not exclusively halakhic, by whose means we may also view the attitude towards those who abandoned the Jewish religion.

The book Sefer Hasidim, written during the first half of the thirteenth century, reflects the ideology of a small movement within the Jewish communities of Germany at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries known as ‘Ashkenazic Hasidism.’ Opinions differ as to the degree of involvement and influence this group exerted upon the Jewish community in general; however, even if it was an elitist group, it had explicit ambitions in the area of leadership, and its writings addressed different levels of the Jewish community. In terms of our present discussion, the sources and manner of writing of this group are very important, as they reflect moods and approaches that are not given expression in the mainstream of halakhic writings, and express substantive and significant mentalities. Ideologically, Ashkenazic Hasidism strongly emphasized the ability to withstand trials as a central component in the self-definition and self-fashioning of the Jew in general, and of the hasid, or ‘pietist,’ in particular, against whom its followers pose the ‘regular’ Jews and the ‘wicked.’

The description of the apostate, or mumar, is expressed in Sefer Hasidim on three levels. On one level, the problematic reality at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries is fully reflected as one in which there were many Jews who had converted to Christianity and yet remained within the environment of the Jewish group. We hear of apostates who had converted and lived in proximity to the community,
at times even inside the community alongside their families who remained Jewish. Sometimes they even sought to participate in the activities of the community itself—for example, in funding the writing of a Torah scroll. They are perceived as a dangerous and negative element, who attempt to persuade Jews to become Christians and denounce Jews to the Christian authorities. The Jewish group felt contempt for them and was wary of their presence; they refer to them with contemptuous and insulting names, and refrain from mentioning their names even if their children are called to the reading of the Torah, or from quoting words of Torah that originated with them.

On the second level, the ideology of Ashkenazic Hasidism, together with the construction of its self-consciousness and identity, is seen as the opposite to that of the apostates. The world is divided into three types of people: ‘the ordinary person,’ ‘the wicked one,’ and ‘the pietist.’ The hasid is a person capable of confronting tests and standing up to them; hence, he also withstands the temptation involved in conversion to Christianity. The ‘ordinary person’ may be tempted, and one may assume that he will not withstand the trial. It is for his sake that one needs to prepare means of atonement and return to Judaism. The ‘evildoer’ is the apostate, the person who has completely failed to stand up to the test and was seduced by Christianity on three separate dimensions—he was seduced by idolatrous religion; the opportunity to fulfill illicit sexual desire; and the possibility of eating anything he wishes. In principle, according to the values of Hasidism, one must accept a Jew who has sinned and become a Christian and now wishes to repent; should he choose to return to Judaism he is treated like any other Jew (i.e., his wine is not considered yayin nesakh—i.e., pagan wine unfit for drinking—and he is not required to immerse himself in the mikveh). Notwithstanding, heavy duties are imposed upon him so that he may begin the process of teshuvah (repentance). First of all, and before all else, he must return to Judaism those whom he converted to Christianity, even if this will subject him to danger, quite literally; until that point, ‘he is not taken back’ for ‘how can his transgressions be atoned?’ That is, by its very nature atonement depends upon the correction of the harm he has caused.

On yet a third level, we find the attitude towards the apostate as one of deep hostility and contempt. He is seen as blemished; the Jewish essence of the apostate is one that was substantially affected by his contact with Christianity, harming and damaging him in future stages of his life, even should he return to Judaism. Harmful apostates are compared to such traitors from within the Jewish people as, according to the midrash, King
Ahab, who was referred to as an ‘apostate out of appetite.’ The Rabshakeh, who served as a messenger of Sennacherib in order to destroy Jerusalem was, according to the midrash, likewise an apostate Jew. The negative attitude towards him derives from the arrogance implicit in his daring to tell the Jews what God thinks of His people. In the Middle Ages, the answer to such an apostate was found, according to Sefer Hasidim, in the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘Shame on you, scorn on you, O virgin daughter of Zion; they wag their heads after you, O daughter of Jerusalem’ (2 Kings 19:21–22). But the principled approach of this book is even more extreme. Jeremiah 22:9–10—‘Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord their God and bowed down to other gods and worshipped them. Do not weep for the dead and do not bemoan him. But weep for those who have gone astray, for they shall no longer return nor see his native land of his birth’—is interpreted as referring to an apostate who died as a Christian and whose relatives considered mourning him. The moment he converts one must lament and mourn for him, as if he had died, ‘for he shall no longer return, but he is dead.’ This argument negates the possibility that the apostate will return to Judaism. Here, for the first time, we encounter the view that Christianity creates a blemish in the very essence of the person—or that perhaps the one who converted to Christianity already suffered a ‘genetic’ (hereditary) blemish in his family’s past, and therefore his conversion was predestined. This approach, which is diametrically opposed to the one that took shape in the days of Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah and Rashi, effectively gives up completely on anyone who has converted to Christianity: his essence was already blemished and therefore there is no reason to invest in his return, given that if he does return his essence will remain unchanged and he is likely to cause harm to other Jews—whereas if he remains a Christian it is possible to be wary of him and he can no longer cause harm. In any event, rather than attempting to bring him in, he is pushed further away, and rather than emphasize that his historical essence is unchanged, emphasis is placed on his blemished nature.

These points are underscored repeatedly in the stories in Sefer Hasidim. The ‘Sage’ (i.e., the figure who gives all the good advice in the book), who perceives that parents are attempting in every possible way to return their converted son to Judaism, advises the parents not to attempt to bring him back. The Sage knows that the youth intends to persuade his brothers and sisters to follow the same evil path, and he also knows that when he was among Jews he caused them to eat non-kosher food (‘he threw treif meat into the pot’). In other words, the Jewishness of the convert was blemished even before his conversion to Christianity, casting doubt upon
the benefit likely to ensue (particularly to his family!) as a result of his return to Judaism. According to the Sage, if prior to his conversion he tried to make his family transgress, there is no reason to believe that after he returns things will be any better. The Sage suggests that something in the essence of the convert to Christianity is corrupt; hence, there is no point in attempting to bring him back to Judaism. The verse on which the author of Sefer Hasidim constructs his argument emphasizes his basic approach: ‘Ephraim is addicted to images, let him be’ (Hosea 4:17). The prophet advises the tribe of Judah to separate itself from the tribe of Ephraim because ‘he is addicted to images’—that is, he has worshipped idols (the word ‘atzavim refers to idolatry, as in Psalm 115:5)—even though Ephraim and Judah were brothers. The halakhic authorities debate the question as to whether a Jew who has converted to Christianity has harmed the concept of brotherhood existing between Jews. The Ashkenazic hasidim assert that, in the case of a Jew who became a Christian, the concept of brotherhood never existed at all, even before he converted to Christianity. Thus, too, in the story of the apostate who informs his community that he wishes to return to Judaism and to steal a large sum of money from the Christians to avenge himself on them, there are three responses. The first states, quite simply, that one who wishes to again be a Jew is forbidden to steal. The second relates to the character of the type of person who initially agreed to convert to Christianity, and discusses the process of atonement he must undergo (as we saw on the second level, above). A person who was overcome by his appetites (the appetite for money, the wish to eat pork, and the desire to violate the Sabbath) must, in undertaking repentance, adopt the opposite type of behavior: he must observe the Sabbath, refrain from eating pork, and take money from the Christians: ‘and if they catch him and he is put to death, then his death will serve as atonement for all his sins.’ The third approach advises not giving him any advice, and thereby not risking endangering the Jewish community. This is what they did in fact, and they were saved, because his true purpose was to defame the Jews. In other words, there was a basic lack of trust in the convert to Christianity because of his presumed blemished nature; this story reflects the approach that his repentance was likewise false.

This process finds full expression in a passage cited in the name of Rabbi Judah he-Hasid on the Talmudic adage: ‘The son of David will not come until all the souls within the body have been completed’ (b. Yevamot 62a). He states that there is a chamber in the Heavens whose name is ‘body’ in which are concentrated all those souls given to human beings that will be born. The angel ‘charged with pregnancy’ places the soul within the body
of the pregnant woman. At times the angel makes a mistake and places a soul intended to be in the body of a Gentile in the body of a Jewish woman, or vice versa. Such a soul will then belong to a person who in the end will convert to Christianity, while that soul which is intended to be a Jew but was placed in the body of a Christian woman will ultimately become a righteous Jewish proselyte. In this manner, the process of change in the definition of consciousness and identity was completed: the Jew who became a Christian was not a Jew in his essence; rather, his soul was incarnated in a Jewish body by mistake, while in practice his soul was that of a Christian. Therefore, the fact that he abandoned his Judaism need not disturb us, as now the ‘error’ has been corrected and we may relate to him as he always was—namely, a Christian. Vice versa with regard to proselytes: the soul of the future convert to Judaism fell into the body of a Gentile by error, and by his act of conversion the Gentile with the Jewish soul restored the situation to what it should have been.

Notes

4 Judah b. Samuel he-Hasid, Sefer Hasidim, Nos. 208, 250 (pp. 82–83), 201 (75), 209 (76), 1,571 (336); J. Katz, Exclusiveness and Tolerance, Oxford 1961, pp. 93–105. It is thus that one may perhaps understand R. Eleazar Ba’al ha-Rokeah of Worms, who perceives him as tantamount to a new proselyte, due to his weighty sins; likewise the approach of R. Meir the Maharam of Rothenburg, who is suspicious that the returned apostate may not have fully repented and will harm Judaism even further.
5 Judah b. Samuel he-Hasid, Sefer Hasidim, Nos. 198 (pp. 74–75), 1,522 (465), 210.
7 Judah b. Samuel he-Hasid, Sefer Hasidim, No. 192 (73–74).
8 Judah b. Samuel he-Hasid, Sefer Hasidim, No. 183 (72).
9 Judah b. Samuel he-Hasid, Sefer Hasidim, No. 200 (75).