

Between Berlin and Jerusalem



“Openness” as an
American *Ikkar*

No Jewish community has been as open to conversion as American Jewry. A Talmud scholar describes her own journey of self-discovery



Jewish life in contemporary North America is defined by its openness towards the culture and society in which it is situated. Given the democratic, pluralistic values promoted in America, Jews and Jewish communities simply do what many other groups do: carve out a space for visibility in the public square and affirm their own cultural voice. The openness of American Jewish life can therefore arguably be described as a direct result of the culture at large.

{ By **CHARLOTTE ELISHEVA FONROBERT**

It is not only that Jews with various affiliations and denominational identities participate in the civic and political life of the U.S., as Jews have often done in previous historical periods of Diaspora life. Rather, openness is also what characterizes many Jewish communities in their willingness and desire to be welcoming to the larger public of which they feel a part. In this sense, the unprecedented number of intermarriages is one manifestation of their commitment to America.

Can openness be thought of not only as a descriptive characteristic of American Jewish life, but as a normative one - as a core principle to be cherished and promoted? Is it reflective of Jewish culture and rooted in the Torah and in the later visions of Jewish continuity that grew out of it?

A Community of Fate

To answer this question, I want to consider the issue of conversion to Judaism as one gauge of Jewish openness. In its very nature, the possibility of conversion opens the boundaries of a community and enables border crossings between cultures and heritages. A stranger can enter the house and stay, become one of us, a *ger* or *giyoret*, a co-resident. Although not biological kin, she will become intimately related.

There has never before been a Jewish culture in which conversion was considered a valid path, and a guiding compass for a Jewish journey, as much it has been in America. The openness towards conversion that is part of the American culture of inventing and re-inventing one's self is an *ikkar*, a core principle of American life. Among Jews, of course, it is not an uncontested principle. In the pages of the Talmud, from the earliest days of the formalization of conversion as a validated Jewish path, we find deep suspicion of conversion. Many Jews are familiar with the differing approaches of Hillel and Shammai, archetypal forefathers of Talmudic Judaism, in their encounters with prospective converts. The tale is told by the Babylonian Talmud in Shabbat 31a, and retold

and echoed through the centuries.

First, a certain non-Jew comes before Shammai and asks: "How many Torahs do you have?" "Two," he replies, "the Written Torah and Oral Torah." The non-Jew retorts, "I believe you with respect to the Written but not with respect to the Oral Torah; make me a *ger* on the condition that you teach me the Written Torah!" Upon which, Shammai scolds and rejects him in anger. When the ignorant seeker comes before Hillel, on the other hand, he converts him, and then begins to educate him.

On another occasion, a non-Jew comes before Shammai demanding: "Make me a *ger*, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot!" Shammai rejects him, while Hillel, when faced with the fast-track seeker, converts him, and famously teaches him an *ikkar*: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." On a third occasion, a non-Jew walks past a synagogue and hears the voice of a teacher reciting verses about the garments of the High Priest. The non-Jew, inspired to convert and become High Priest, goes to Shammai demanding: "Make me a *ger*, on condition that you appoint me High Priest." Shammai, of course, rejects him, whereas Hillel, when approached by the over-ambitious seeker, converts him, and again educates him afterwards.

Rabbinic and other Jewish voices throughout the centuries can be grouped along this scale of two extremes. Sometimes, Shammaite anger at the would-be convert may seem ethically and emotionally justified, particularly in historical moments when collective traumatic experiences forge an overpowering sense of "we," of "us." In 1994, for example, the outspoken German Jewish journalist Henryk Broder rebuked German converts to Judaism, accusing them of being motivated by the desire to move over to "the right side of history, from the national community of perpetrators into the community of suffering of the victim." Indeed, the famous Talmudic injunction to dissuade the would-be *ger* is formulated as a reminder of the historical experience of collective trauma:

We learn in an early tradition: If at the present time [after the destruction of the Temple] a person wishes to become a *ger*, he is to be addressed in this manner: “What is your reason for desiring to become a *ger*; do you not know that ‘Israel’ at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by affliction?” If he answers, ‘I know, and yet I am not worthy,’ he is accepted and given instruction in the commandments.” BT Yevamot 47a-47b

This oft-invoked tradition evokes the notion of the Jewish body politic as a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, a “community of fate” that has endured suffering and whose individual members are connected to the historical experience by kinship and other intimate bonds. But in today’s pluralistic America, outsiders who wish to join the Jewish collective are less likely to be regarded with suspicion.

Shreds and Ruins

Before I proceed with these reflections, I have to place them within my own biographical context, which inevitably inflects my thinking on the subject. Every voice has a certain inflection, and it behooves me to explain my own as I make a case for openness as a Jewish *ikkar*.

My entryway to Jewish life was the first Talmudic text I learned:

Kol yisra’el yesh lahem helek ba’olam haba - All of Israel have a share in the World to Come (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1).

That text - my opening into a world - rang differently when I first encountered it in postwar Germany: *Kol yisra’el yesh lahem olam ha-ba* - There is a World to Come for all of Israel. I grew up in a Germany where the Jews I might have known, had our twentieth century been a different one, were mostly dead. But Judaism,

as I grew to appreciate, is not about death and victimhood, but about life and a future. This Judaism means refusing to accept the world that we are born into as fate, as defining us entirely in its facticity and refusing to give up on the fundamental belief that our world is not yet as good as it was meant to be.

The millions of dead Jews I grew up with had, in my mind, been replaced by Israel, a place over there. The Jewish community in Germany was one that was made up mostly of Jewish survivors of the war, and of people who had landed in DP camps and for various reasons remained in Germany after the war. The Jews of Germany were remnants from mythic worlds, the world of East European shtetl Judaism and of the German Jewish bourgeoisie and its glorious, magnificent contributions to the modernization of German culture. They hung on to the shreds and ruins of what was left of Jewish life after the war and made the best of it.

Post-war synagogues were mostly Orthodox, and the Orthodox rabbinate was for the most part imported from abroad. The barriers between Jews and non-Jewish Germans, both reduced to the one-dimensional relationship of victim and perpetrator, were insurmountable, their relationship marked by a chain of embarrassing public *faux pas* and well-meaning, but awkward affirmations of *Brüderlichkeit* (brotherliness). Socio-politically, Jews were where Augustine had always wanted them to be in Christian terms - a people who bear witness, a symbol, a reminder, but most certainly not part of “us” Germans. We grew up in a world that was hard to accept, not only because of the purported collective German guilt, but simply for the inhuman possibilities that had come to define our world.

In my pursuit to study theology, I came to learn biblical Hebrew and my first *dappim* of Talmud, at a Protestant-Lutheran seminary in Berlin during the mid-1980s. There I came across the following dispute:



"Hunger, the Price of Defeat,"
photo by Emil Reynolds,
Berlin, 1945. Courtesy of the
Library of Congress.



Rabbi Eliezer said: "If Israel repent, they will be redeemed, as it is written, 'Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings' (Jeremiah 3:22)."

Rabbi Yehoshua said: "But is it not written, 'you have sold yourselves for nothing; and you shall be redeemed without money'? (Isaiah 52:3) That is, you have sold yourselves for nothing, for idolatry; and you shall be redeemed without money - without repentance and without good works." (BT Sanhedrin 97b)

This argument, which resonated so deeply to a Protestant theologian in training, can easily be read as being born from profound, potentially irreconcilable theological sensibilities. According to one position (Rabbi Eliezer, and ultimately Judaism as we know it), redemption is tied to repentance, and the state of the world to human behavior and ethics. In the other (Rabbi Yehoshua), it is not: redemption will come about regardless of human behavior, as a gift. Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer echo Paul's dyad of faith versus works. Is it "faith" and faith alone - in Rabbi Yehoshua's terms "you shall be redeemed without (good) works" - that will bring about redemption? Rabbi Yehoshua seems like Paul in disguise, as he argues vigorously and radically on behalf of faith, whereas Rabbi Eliezer upholds one of the deepest sensibilities underlying rabbinic Judaism, namely the belief in the ultimate significance of good deeds and the moral fabric of the universe.

The Berlin in which I studied this dispute was still divided, still living tangibly with the consequences of having unleashed the apocalyptic, genocidal war on the world four decades earlier. In such a city, how could anyone have thought of converting, of becoming one of "them"? Rephrasing Yevamot 47a, people might ask: "What could your reason possibly be for desiring to become a *ger*; do you not know that 'Israel'

at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed, and overcome by affliction?"

In post-war Berlin, how could anyone have thought of converting, of becoming one of "them"?

I came to study biblical Hebrew because Protestant-Lutheran ministers, with their commitment to *sola scriptura* - the doctrine that only the Bible is the gateway to salvation - must know the language of the Word of God. The Midrash, however, suggests that this isn't enough:

Since the Holy One, Blessed be He, foresaw that the gentiles would translate the written Torah and read it in Greek and thereupon they would declare: "We are Israel"... the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the nations: "You claim that you are my children? I had no idea! Only those who possess my mysteries are my children." Which are the mysteries? The oral Torah. (Tanhuma, Ki Tissa 34).

I was certainly the product of Pauline and Lutheran Christianity, a Christianity built on the idea of assuming the role of the biblical people of Israel. Biblical Hebrew was a Lutheran language, along with New Testament Greek and the Latin of St. Jerome, translator of the Bible in the 4th century CE. But I came to study my first *dappim* of Talmud because I wanted to find the soul of Judaism that I thought had to still linger in this world, somehow, in spite of the murder of its people. Learning in one of the deepest valleys of death in Jewish memory, I fell in love with the God of Midrash and Aggadah, the intimacy of the portrayal of the relationship between the rabbinic sages and their God as portrayed in the midrashic accounts, and the

compelling negotiations of that relationship in the Talmudic discussions. But it was a life still without Shabbat and prayer, the life of a dream conjured up by generations of rabbinic sages almost two millennia ago and committed to memory and eventually paper in order to reach us - and me, a Protestant theologian in training - at an unlikely place in the late twentieth century.

A New World

Shabbat, prayer and the *derekh*, the Jewish path, came with my sojourn in the San Francisco Bay Area and its vibrant Jewish Studies community, after only a few semesters in Germany. Here I entered a world where scholars and students of various types and shades of Jewish commitment and observance mingled. A San Francisco Reform rabbi, originally from an illustrious German-Jewish rabbinic family and a staunch believer in American multi-culturalism, had brought me here. In the creative universe of Berkeley, I met and studied with the secular Jewish intellectual and cultural historian, David Biale; the kabbalist Daniel Matt; the Orthodox Talmud teacher and historian, Edward Fram; and eventually the unorthodox Orthodox scholar of Talmud, Daniel Boyarin.

My fellow students were everything from Orthodox to queer liberal rabbi, from right-wing Zionist to anti-Zionist, secular, anti-religious, you name it. I entered what seemed to me like the cacophonous, multi-vocal world that made up the pages of the Talmud. My Jewish peers invited me for Shabbat dinners, for Passover *sedarim*. I worked as a *Shabbes-goy* - my first Jewish identity - for the emerging, local Conservative synagogue, and eventually drifted over to the diversely Modern Orthodox synagogue. Jews were American neighbors - and perhaps *neighborliness* is a different name for my *ikkar* - not exotic remainders of a world long gone.

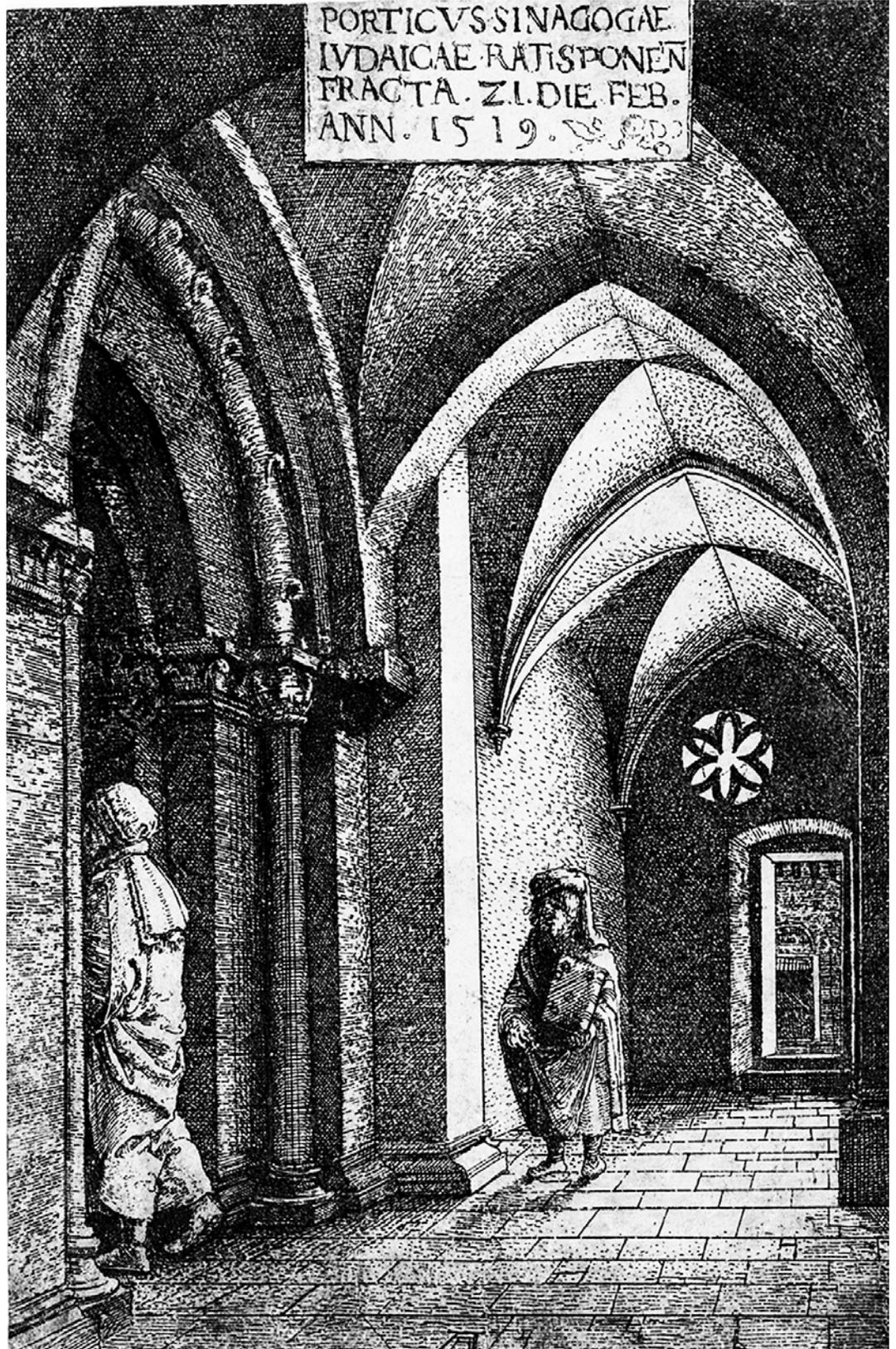
For me, coming from postwar Germany and its difficult relationship with its Jewish community, the Jewish community of the

San Francisco Bay Area seemed like a sort of *olam haba*, a premonition of a world to come. I fell in love with that Jewish world, not only because it was far away from the Holocaust, but because of its vibrancy, its excitement, the neighborliness, the unapologetic and matter-of-fact Jewishness with which people lived their diversely Jewish lives. This was a world in which conversion made sense, a Jewish world that literally remade me.

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It took a few years before I stood in front of the Beit Din. During those years of academic and personal study of Talmudic literature with a variety of teachers in the United States and in Israel, Rabbi Eliezer kept debating with Rabbi Yehoshua in my mind. In the end, there was no one particular point I can pin down at which my decision to convert was made, no road to Damascus. It was the immersion in the world of the rabbis and in the world of American Jews that eroded the childhood fences of identity - European, post-war German, humanist. At some point, certainty had taken root so deeply, the distance from German Protestantism grown so large, that approaching the rabbi of the shul where I had gone for years anyhow was the obvious thing to do.

It is this narrative that provides the frame for proposing openness as an *ikkar* in American Jewish life. Every conversion narrative is by definition personal, subjective, the result of the particularities of a life's path, on which one encounters people or texts that are compelling for a variety of particular factors. Texts resonate because of contexts, and encounters with people can be transformative



Synagogue in Regensburg, Germany, 1519. Etching by Albrecht Altdorfer (ca. 1480 – 1538).

because in that moment a mind and soul are receptive for particular reasons. My narrative is no more paradigmatic than any other, and that is not why I consider it to be a necessary part of reflecting on the nature of American Jewish core principles. It is merely one of many idiosyncratic, autobiographical narratives that may shed light on the character, the cultural context, of the Jewish worlds through which it moved. Such narratives, collectively, may be more instructive than the numbers that social scientists supply us with.

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What the numbers do tell us, though, is that according to the National Jewish Population Survey of 1970 the rate of conversion to Judaism in cases of intermarriage was as high as 25%, whereas by the NJPS of 1990 this rate had decreased to 5%, in spite of stabilizing intermarriage rates. (The NJPS of 2000-01 does not include this statistic, but does suggest that overall intermarriage rates had stabilized.) The acceptance of patrilineal descent as a normative criterion of Jewish identity by the Reform movement is the best explanation, it seems to me, for the decrease of marital conversions.

Either way, openness, mingling, and neighborliness are a civic reality in America. Jewish values, traditions, narratives and practices have a public visibility to unprecedented degrees. They are mixed and remixed in ways that may make people of European background - at least of my generation, who grew up with an inchoate notion of cultural authenticity as a core principle - cringe at times. In this, such Europeans resemble the stereotypical secular Israeli for whom the shul she does not go to is the Orthodox shul, and not those liberal Israeli shuls that seem like American imports.

But in fact, it is the American Jewish *ikkar* of openness that grants our tradition and culture a much more diverse life, and therefore a strong and healthy capacity for both reinvention and continuity with the past. In a context where cultural and religious authority is dispersed, we have to rely on the rhetorical arts of persuasion, discussion, exploration, and contestation to enable our traditions, practices, and texts to unfold. In Israel, institutional structures prescribe and enforce “authentic” Jewish identities by virtue of the power that they wield. The Chief Rabbinate continues to enjoy official state recognition as the arbiter of Jewish authenticity. This has inevitably led to a realization within American Jewish communities that their religious interests and worldviews are very different from the Israeli model, where politics and power struggles have usurped the tradition of Talmudic debate.

In the long run, what stands to be lost in Israel is Jewish tradition as we know it. As sympathetic and committed as I am to the halachic vision of the continuity of Judaism as articulated, and struggled with, by our Talmudic sages, I am also beholden to the belief that such commitment has to come with conviction and not as a result of political and institutional force. It is in this recent form of the dispute over who gets to define “who is a Jew” that the American Jewish *ikkar* of openness should be - and indeed has been - upheld in the name of Torah values.

Giyyur, the individual, private path that is born from particular relationships and contexts, cannot simply be regulated, enforced, or revoked by one centralized institution, however much political power it may amass. Abraham, the father of all *gerim*, followed the Voice that led him away from home and family. Ruth, the ancestor of the proto-typical messianic king in our tradition, followed Naomi to leave home and family. *Gerim* will continue to do so in Berkeley, in Los Angeles, in New York and Boston, and they will continue to do so in Berlin and Frankfurt, and hopefully they will continue to do so in Haifa and Tel Aviv.



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