

"All These Efforts Were Failures":

Alliances of Hebrew Christians

In 1931, American church leaders, led by missionary statesman John Mott, convened a conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to discuss the "Christian Approach to the Jews."

At their request, Charles Fahs, curator of Union Theological Seminary's Missionary Research Library, surveyed sixty-seven Jewish mission centers to determine exactly what work was then in progress. Though sympathetic, Fahs candidly offered his opinion of the "Hebrew Christian mind":

... the impression is received that the Jewish converts have lost the sense of at-home-ness with the Jewish people but have not yet achieved such a sense in the circles of Gentile Christians. The result, with not a few such Hebrew Christians, is the development of an apologetic or defensive attitude with both Jews and Christians.... In other words, the inescapable conditions under which certain of these Hebrew Christians must live and work militate as yet against the full integration of their personalities.¹

Fahs surveyed men who had been missionaries to the Jews since the turn of the century. They typified Jewish converts of this period, and their profession placed them at the vanguard of the American Hebrew Christian community.

This was most certainly not the image sought by the Hebrew Christians. On the contrary, turn-of-the-century missionaries anxious to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work showcased their converts. The Chicago Hebrew Mission, for example, paraded them before its annual meetings to recount their conversion stories. The Mission's journal duly noted the "joy on their faces" and reported that many supporters found the testimonies the "best part of the meeting."² Certainly the obvious presence of Jewish Christians significantly bolstered the faith of gentile believers who saw in them a portent of the second coming. I. M. Harris, a layman heading an organization advocating Jewish evangelism, spoke for many when he opened the annual meeting of Pittsburgh's New Covenant Mission by noting that

the "time was near at hand" when all Jews would be saved.³ The speakers who followed included several Jewish Christians affiliated with the local mission.

Proselytes thus placed on pedestals, however, suffered casualties. The United States, unlike England, featured a large number of independent mission boards. New converts often found themselves employed as missionaries regardless of how much instruction they had in their faith. Missionary councils discussed the problem of inadequate training, but could do little to prevent unqualified individuals from taking the field, occasionally with disastrous results.⁴ During the 1890s major scandals rocked Hebrew Christianity,⁵ so much so that mission chronicler A. E. Thompson admitted in 1902 that in America, "There has also been an open field for the few imposters [sic] ... who have gone from city to city in the guise of converts, and have succeeded as completely in prejudicing both Jews and Christians against Jewish converts as they have in securing sympathy and assistance."⁶

Under these clouds, Hebrew Christians took the first steps toward founding an organization which could represent their interests. Twenty-five converts gathered in Boston in May, 1901, to attend the "Hebrew Messianic Conference" sponsored by Dr. E. S. Niles, an eccentric physician and avid supporter of Jewish missions. He apparently hoped the meeting would provide a platform from which he could propagate Messianic Judaism, a theology not unlike that of the late Twentieth Century, which he believed would make conversion more palatable to Orthodox Jews. Niles unfortunately ignored the many proselytes who found Christianity appealing precisely because it removed from them the necessity of keeping the Law, and few of the missionaries showed enthusiasm for his doctrine. Rather it had the opposite effect of further alienating them. Niles, they felt, raised the uncomfortable specter of "Gentile Christians, who have no conception of [the Law's] burden and irksomeness, [insisting] that their Hebrew Christian friends shall still groan under its yoke of bondage."⁷ This unsettling vision compelled five participants to fashion a committee with the avowed intention of forming "a Union, or Alliance, among those who have been led out of Judaism into the full light of the Gospel."⁸

To Louis Meyer, appointed secretary, fell the principal organizational duties. In 1901 this young German immigrant had just begun his pastoral career in Hopkinton, Iowa. Educated as a physician before his conversion, his impressive scholarship appealed to Americans, and several of his articles had already appeared in the respected Missionary Review of the World. He was becoming an acknowledged and

well known spokesman for Jewish Christianity, but he approached his new task with more than a little trepidation. The scandals of the previous decade still hung over the Hebrew Christian community, and internecine feuds continued.

From his historical studies, Meyer knew that Jewish Christians had founded several small associations or brotherhoods throughout the nineteenth century. He did not find their example encouraging: "All these efforts were failures, and none existed more than two years."⁹ Nothing that had transpired in the previous decade convinced him that the current movement would fare any better.

Only in November of 1902 did Meyer gather enough courage to send out a letter to converts inviting them to an organizational meeting the following July. He wrote that he feared "all the difficulties in the way" of Hebrew Christian unity, but he pointed out that the potential benefit of mutual fellowship outweighed the threat of quarrels. Additionally, he noted that the Church, seeing signs of amity, would no longer consider Jewish missions "an unsuccessful and a hopeless work." Still he finished with a warning: "But let us, lastly, call your attention to the fact a close alliance of Hebrew-Christians is the only way in which we can oppose, and perhaps control, the numerous frauds and vagabonds who, posing as converts, martyrs, or missionaries, are undoubtedly the greatest hindrance in the way of Jewish Missions."¹⁰

To his surprise and pleasure, Meyer received 439 responses to his letter, only two of which opposed the proposed gathering.¹¹ When the meeting was actually scheduled for the Mountain Lake Park conference grounds in Maryland, however, only thirteen "delegates" could arrange to come. Despite the disappointing numbers, Meyer decided to proceed, and those who eventually attended broadly represented the American Hebrew Christian community as it was constituted at the time. Only two were not directly involved in some form of Christian ministry to Jewish immigrants. Most were immigrants themselves. They counted at least nine different denominations among them, and several would play key roles in defining Hebrew Christianity over the next few decades.

As Meyer had feared, the wide diversity of opinion and background among the delegates engendered more than a little strife. His own actions contributed significantly to the problem. Despite his written call for unity, as a Presbyterian minister he joined with the Lutheran Rev. A. R. Kuldell in refusing to participate in a joint communion service led by Hebrew Christians of other denominations.¹² Having thereby demonstrated the priority of Christian doctrinal distinctions over Jewish blood, Meyer went on to display an annoying and pedantic tendency to correct those

who trespassed on his statistical and historical preserve. Harry Zeckhausen, a much respected physician with the New York City Mission, felt Meyer's sting when he cited what the German scholar branded "absolutely misleading" numbers in support of an argument that Jewish baptisms were increasing. Meyer next challenged Amos Dushaw, a student at Union Theological Seminary, for presenting "certain views reflecting modern thought" in his address on mission methods. Meyer's affiliation with conservative American Christians made itself evident in his denunciation of the "destructive criticism" which the seminarian employed.¹³

Despite these apparent differences between delegates, unity remained the theme of the conference, and around certain central propositions it could be achieved. Kuldell voiced these in an opening address suggesting reasons "why Hebrew-Christians should unite." They needed first to remember Israel, "the rock from which we are hewn." Though they had disavowed "our people's unbelief," Kuldell demanded that they remain Jewish. "Our nation," he argued, stands unique in God's plan of the ages.... Of all the nations ours is the only one that owes its birth to a miracle."¹⁴ Kuldell's citation of Israel's purpose struck a responsive chord among his fellow delegates. He next pointed out that Hebrew Christians required a united testimony if they were to have any influence on their own people, particularly in light of contemporary Zionism which distracted from spiritual concerns. Finally, he argued, the Church needed Hebrew Christians. Only they could bridge the gap between Christians and Jews and resolve the enmity existing toward an "unassimilated foreign element in an organic body" of the Christian world.¹⁵

The vision of Hebrew Christians leading Jews and Christians together under the banner of Christ obviously appealed to these men, and the growing influence of dispensationalism gave ample reason for hope that something of this sort could actually come about. Hyman Jacobs, a Presbyterian convert, invoked the signs of the times when he noted, "The last fifty years have seen an unusual awakening among the Jewish race." If the delegates wished to capitalize on this trend, they needed to "love one another, ... rejoice in the success, estimate the good qualities, and overlook the infirmities of each other."¹⁶ In this spirit, they passed a mild resolution "that steps be taken to purify the ranks of Hebrew-Christians" of imposters and frauds,¹⁷ but they did not go so far as to discuss any means for bringing this about. Instead, they allowed themselves to be distracted by the more prominent threat of Messianic Judaism.

This controversial theology claimed few adherents, but even so, a provocative speech by Mark Levy consumed an entire afternoon. In doing so, it exercised the delegates far more than the potentially devastating problem of scandal within their ranks. At his public lecture, Levy advocated the maintenance of Jewish culture and more. Taking the offensive, he claimed that all converts should be allowed, even encouraged, to maintain as much of the Law as did not directly contradict the New Testament. This in itself guaranteed controversy, but Levy fanned the flames further with his insistence that his coworkers' feeble commitment to Jewish culture derived mostly from their fear of church leaders who paid their salaries. His disclaimer that law-keeping had nothing to do with salvation paled beside the more inflammatory verbiage.¹⁸ The Conference Minutes dryly noted that, "A short discussion followed this address, the brethren taking issue with Bro. Levy as to the 'expediency' of the 'methods' he advocated."¹⁹ Dushaw, ever the progressive liberal, spoke for most when he pointedly denounced "the return to ceremonialism," by which he meant the practice of the Law. "What would we think," he asked rhetorically, "of a man who on being dragged out of a pit, should immediately go back in again?"²⁰ Kuldell, Meyer and Maurice Ruben, a local Jewish Christian missionary, as editors of the Minutes, printed Levy's text "only after the most serious consideration" and then with a lengthy caveat noting that he "stood alone in his teaching," and that American churches had never prohibited converts from observing the Law. They carefully noted that justification came solely "through faith in Christ without the deeds of the Law," and argued that their Jewish nationality derived from their birth, having nothing to do with observance or non-observance of ceremonies. They insisted that the keeping of the Law would produce no acceptance from a Jewish community which ostracized them for their Christianity and nothing else.²¹

The editors allowed Levy to append an "answer," pasted into some copies of the Minutes, reiterating his position. In his own defense, Levy pointed out that Brooklyn missionary Leopold Cohn "who was present at the Conference (later)" shared his point of view on the issue. He charged that the editors ignored his use of the Pauline precedent that they must become "as Jews ... to gain the Jews" and "as under the Law ... to gain them that are under the Law." He resurrected the embarrassing fact that Meyer and Kuldell, by refusing to share communion, placed their positions as pastors of gentile congregations above their loyalty to their Jewish brothers. This act "weakens our Hebrew Christian brotherhood" and provided yet another reason for con-

verts divided by concerns not central to Hebrew Christianity to unite in their Jewishness. Meyer, Kuldell and others could be separated by issues of theology, but having been born Jews, they would just as surely die Jews, a detail Levy insisted they remember.²²

Despite Levy's entreaties, the delegates refused to endorse his views. They did not wish to reject their Jewish roots, but the radicalism of Messianic Judaism placed it too much on the fringes of Christian orthodoxy, and ideologues such as Niles and Levy had limited influence within American Christendom. The missionaries also recognized, as Levy charged, that the dispensationalists who financially underwrote Jewish missions would not find much to admire in a Judaized Christianity. Much to be preferred was the tack taken by Louis Meyer who, excited by the possibilities of union, trumpeted the Conference from his literary pulpit in Missionary Review. It was, he proclaimed, "the most encouraging sign perceived in Jewish mission work for many years." Even so, Meyer asserted the broader utility of a legion of Jewish Christians. Writing in a publication designed for ministers and mission leaders, Meyer portrayed proselytes as a kind of fifth column among the world's heathens whose conversion could only aid the massive worldwide missionary effort: "For when the Jewish believers in Christ, scattered over the whole world and found in every condition of life, are thus banded together for earnest Gospel effort, we may look for the onward march of the Gospel not only among the Jews, but also among the heathen."²³

Meyer's hopes for a "Hebrew Christian Alliance" to bring together such a mission would not be realized, at least not immediately. Within a few months, the tensions exposed at the Conference got the better of an Executive Committee composed of veteran missionaries Zeckhausen, Cohn, Philip Sidersky and J. R. Lewek. Forty years later Zeckhausen spoke cryptically of an unspecified "disagreement as to the policy" which precluded further progress.²⁴ Whatever the nature of the disputes, plans for a second meeting were indefinitely postponed. The 1901 gathering had clearly revealed antagonisms within Hebrew Christianity which would be difficult to overcome.

The failure to establish an alliance relegated most participants in the 1903 conference to obscurity, at least for the next few years. Louis Meyer, whose career peaked in the ensuing decade, stood out as an exception. His appointment as Field Secretary of the Chicago Hebrew Mission assured him high visibility, and his familiarity with the United States and with dispensationalist theology gained him access to church leaders. His name became commonplace at

Christian meetings, and he reportedly "made a big hit with the large audience" at Torrey's first Bible conference in Winona Lake, Indiana.²⁵ In 1908, he achieved the further honor of being named assistant editor of Missionary Review of the World.²⁶

While Meyer never criticized other missionaries publicly, his fellow Hebrew Christians felt less gratitude than resentment at his German background and education. These not only insulated Meyer from ghetto life, they allowed him a status within the church that was unavailable to Eastern Europeans. This did not endear him to proselytes who prided themselves on their cultural heritage. It did not help that his friends knew him as a rationalist who as a student had been "sometimes even ashamed of his Jewish birth."²⁷ Meyer's bookish and critical personal manner further alienated potential colleagues, provoking yet greater resentment at the respect accorded one who had never had the experience of being a "greenhorn" in American society.

The simmering feud broke into the open as Meyer became involved in a move by the Presbyterian Church to begin Jewish mission work. In 1909, several years after the Hebrew Christians' failure to form an alliance, the Church charged its Home Mission Department of Immigration to develop an approach to America's growing numbers of Jewish immigrants. Proselytes cautiously welcomed the participation of a major denomination in the field, but they wanted one of their own appointed to head or at least advise those leading the effort. Charles Stelzle, supervisor of the Department of Immigration, gave them grounds for hope, because he plainly wished to consider the attitudes of Jewish Christians. To prepare himself, Stelzle, who took pride in his understanding of immigrant peoples, toured European missions to Jews. There, however, he demonstrated little sympathy toward the evangelistic approach. Stelzle had worked on the Lower East Side for years and believed Jews possessed a high moral character. Nothing he saw in Europe dissuaded him from this view.

During this trip I visited practically every organization of the kind in the larger cities and interviewed many of their leaders, and I was convinced that they were practically all of them failures. Their social and medical work was to be commended, but only on a broad humanitarian basis, just as it might be for any other group of people. The religious aspects of their activities, however, seemed to me to be extremely questionable.²⁸

Nevertheless, Meyer eagerly anticipated a scheduled meeting between Stelzle and fifty missionaries.²⁹ After his European tour, however, Stelzle informed the gathering that he was "altogether opposed to Jewish missions," and that it was "fatal to try to make a poor Protestant out of a good Jew."

Though he recognized that many Presbyterians, out of a concern for prophecy, felt the church should establish such a work, Stelzle effectively blocked any extensive funding of a mission work.³⁰ In his column, Meyer tried to paper over the disaster.

No definite outward results were achieved and no resolutions were passed, yet we consider it the most successful conference ever held in the United States on Jewish Missions. It clearly showed that the differences of opinion of Christian workers among the Jews in America are very small as far as methods of work and the relation of Christian Jews to the Church are concerned, and that the vast majority of those present believed that ... such keeping of national customs is non-essential in the missionary work among the Jews....³¹

Perhaps Meyer could afford some optimism because he seemed to have again profited from his background. Later that year, Meyer left the Chicago Hebrew Mission to take charge of the Jewish work of the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Other Jewish Christians quickly expressed shock that such a prestigious post should be given to a man with virtually no day-to-day experience in American immigrant communities. A storm of opposition soon developed.

Philip Sidersky, founder of the small, nondenominational Emmanuel Christian Mission, led the assault, sending an open letter to Meyer with copies to the press and to the Rev. Stelzle. His tone was frank and brutal as he criticized Meyer's failure to live among his own Jewish people.

¹Charles Fahs, "The Christian Approach to the Jews: A Survey" (unpublished manuscript, Union Theological Seminary, 1931), p. 6. This report was quoted at some length by Max Eisen, "Christian Missions to the Jews in North America and Great Britain," Jewish Social Studies 10 (1948): 45-50.

²"The All-Day Conference," Jewish Era, Jan. 15, 1908, p. 24 (hereafter cited as JE).

³Pittsburg Press, Dec. 12, 1899.

⁴See Louis Meyer, "For the Salvation of Israel," Missionary Review of the World, July 1906, p. 528 (hereafter cited as MRW).

⁵Jacob Freshman, the second generation Hebrew Christian who played such a prominent role in founding the Chicago Hebrew Mission, resigned the pastorate of his "Hebrew Christian Church" amid charges that he had paid several immigrants to convert and assist him in fundraising. Almost immediately thereafter, the Presbyterian Church dismissed Hermann Warszawiak, a charismatic Jewish Christian with wide support in the United States and Scotland, after a lengthy and rancorous trial. David Eichhorn provides a concise discussion in "A History of Christian Attempts to Convert the Jews in the United States and Canada" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew Union College, 1938), pp. 464-71, 483-528. A briefer version was published as Eichhorn, Evangelizing the American Jew (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, 1978). Cf. "The Case of Hermann Warszawiak. Before the Session of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. April 5 to June 10, 1897," Presbyterian Historical Society, Phila-

delphia, Pennsylvania, Archives.

⁶A. E. Thompson, A Century of Jewish Missions (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1902), p. 252.

⁷[B. A. M. Schapiro,] "The Hebrew Messianic Council," The People, the Land and the Book I (March 1901): 268-9 (hereafter cited as PLB); cf. "The Question of Judaized Christianity for Hebrews," Salvation, 1901, p. 253-4.

⁸Minutes of the First Hebrew-Christian Conference of the United States (Pittsburgh: n.p., 1903), p. 5.

⁹Louis Meyer, "Hebrew Christian Brotherhood in America," JE, April 15, 1903, p. 65.

¹⁰Minutes, p. 5.

¹¹Ibid., p. 6.

¹²Ibid., p. 50a.

¹³Ibid., pp. 2, 39-40; cf. Salvation 4 (1903): 263.

¹⁴Minutes, pp. 14-5.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁸Levy's address, "The Scripture Method of Preaching the Gospel 'to the Jew First,'" was reprinted in full in the Minutes, pp. 40-51.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 1.

²⁰Ibid., p. 59.

²¹Ibid., pp. 51-2.

²²Ibid., p. 51a.

²³Louis Meyer, "Encouragements in Missionary Work Among the Jews," MRW, Dec. 1903, pp. 902-3.

²⁴Harry Zeckhausen, "Retrospect: Steps Leading to the Organization of the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America," Hebrew Christian Alliance Quarterly XXV (Summer 1940): 27 (hereafter cited as HCAQ).

²⁵"The Work of Our Field Secretary, Rev. Louis Meyer," JE, Oct. 1908, p. 144.

²⁶This fact was proudly reported by the Chicago Hebrew Mission. "The Work of Our Field Secretary," Ibid., Oct. 1907, p. 154.

²⁷Mrs. T. C. Rounds, "A Christian Prince," Ibid., Oct. 1913, p. 124.

²⁸Charles Stelzle, A Son of the Bowery, The Life Story of an East Side American (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), pp. 147-8. For Stelzle, see also Susan Curtis, A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 254-65.

²⁹See Louis Meyer, "The Missionary Department," JE, April 15, 1909, pp. 67-8.

³⁰Stelzle, pp. 147-8.

³¹Louis Meyer, "The Missionary Department," JE, Jan. 15, 1909, pp. 13-20.