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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BRIDGING MESSIANIC CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERAL JUDAISM: A JOURNEY OF AN AMERICAN CONVERT

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Introduction

In the US as in Israel, there is an almost unbridgeable gap between the Jewish world and Messianic groups. Many Messianic groups blend Judaism with Christian ideas, but their basic belief in Jesus Christ puts them "outside the Jewish tent" even for very liberal Jews. More than other Christians, Messianic movements in particular are perceived not only as clearly belonging to another religion, but also as a potential threat, due to their traditional attempt to recruit Jewish members.

This study explores current issues of conversion to Judaism and attitudes towards Judaism among American Messianic groups through an anthropological analysis of the story of one convert, and her way to Judaism. Jane converted and became a member of a Liberal Jewish congregation in Midwest US in 2012-2013, when she was fifty years old. She grew up in a family that belonged to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Later in her life she belonged (for twenty years) to different Messianic churches and other Christian groups who stress different kinds of connections to Judaism or to some Jewish or Hebrew elements.[1] In some of these groups former Jews have important leadership positions. Still, Jane's story shows that sometimes the direction is different: activity in Messianic groups that stress the connection to Judaism can lead also to conversion and to a process that will result in joining the Jewish people.

Hers is a story of conversion to Judaism that includes a connection to a world of Messianic churches and different Messianic groups.[2] Through this narrative I will explore contemporary issues of conversion and relations to Judaism among potential converts in general and Messianic

groups in particular. This case study reveals a dynamic and vivid world of groups and individuals who come mainly from a Christian background, but see themselves as close to Judaism and to Jews. At the same time, Jane's experience also enables us to examine how one "joins" Judaism (specifically Liberal Judaism) in the United States.

What Jews perceive as a clear border demarcating Judaism and Christianity in general and Messianic groups in particular, is not necessarily clear to Christians who have an interest in Judaism, and even more so for some members of Messianic churches. I witnessed an example that demonstrates these different viewpoints while I spent time as a guest professor in a college town in the Southern United States.

During my stay in the US (2012-2014) I conducted a participant observation in order to learn about Jewish life in two college cities outside the big Jewish centers, in the South and in the Midwest. In the college town where I stayed in 2011-2, there were two active synagogues, as well as a Chabad and a Hillel centre. During a conversation in the Conservative synagogue, I was told about yet another synagogue which was located in a different part of town. This new information intrigued me. I had been researching the Jewish community in that town for some time. How is it, I asked myself, that the existence of this synagogue had gone unnoticed—and I did not hear about it from local Jews?

At a later date I went to the neighbourhood of this mysterious new synagogue—a nice upper and upper-middle class area in an old part of the town. There I finally determined the reason for my unfamiliarity with it: this was a centre of Messianic Jews. The signage in the centre was partially in Hebrew, and the place was run by a Hebrew-speaking Messianic Jew who called himself a "Rabbi." On the day I first visited, a fair was being held in the street. The Messianic Rabbi was playing Jewish and Israeli songs with an accordion, perhaps in order to attract attention from the passers-by. Later I came to further understand the confusing information I had received. I realized that the person who told me about the Messianic centre was not a Jew, even though she often joined the prayers in the Conservative synagogue. For her, a non-Jew, the Messianic centre was just another synagogue, while for most Jews in town it wasn't even a blip on their radar. Even those who knew of its presence erased it from their consciousness.

The woman in this particular example found an interest in Judaism, and chose the Conservative synagogue to pursue her interest. She became part of a growing phenomenon in American Jewish Liberal synagogues of non-Jews who attend synagogue activities. Eventually, this can lead also to conversion—although many of these individuals do not convert (and

hence—their presence introduces new challenges to these synagogues which require a different discussion). But what happened to others, who found their way to the Messianic synagogue (or actually—a church from most Jewish perspectives)? In some similarity to the example here, before they become aware of the boundaries between Judaism and the Messianic movement, as they are perceived by Jewish traditional viewpoints, some members of Messianic movements can become potential newcomers to Judaism. Their way to Judaism, however, is somehow different from other Christian converts, and involves different difficulties in the attempt to "cross" what Jews see as an unbridgeable gap.

In his book *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews* (2013) Yaakov Ariel describes the emergence of the Messianic movement. The offshoot developed among Jews and Christians, and managed with relative success to bridge the chasm between them. Ariel demonstrates the feeling of accord among the newcomers who see themselves as Jews on one hand but as believers in "Christ as the Messiah" on the other hand. However, though Ariel describes many acts of Jewish tolerance towards Messianic Jews, a common understanding, at least from a Jewish point of view, stresses the boundaries between Messianic groups and Jews.

In this paper I will give a complementary analysis, by examining a concrete encounter, at a "micro" level, and by focusing on a case of transition between a "Messianic" identity and a Jewish Liberal one. I will attempt to demonstrate and explain why, though theologically incomprehensible, recent dynamics allow individuals from Messianic groups to get closer to American Jews.

On the one hand, one can argue that the chasm between Institutionalized Judaism (in its many different forms) and Christianity, including the Messianic Church, still exists, as it always has. On the other hand, as I will show below, the development of the Messianic movements, and its diversity, open interesting new ways that in some cases might challenge some individuals to cross this boundary and convert.

Jane's case, hence, is relevant to two separate discussions. The first is the documentation of an individual's religious conversion process. Jane's story is of a gradual change in religious views, peaking with the realization that Jesus is not God or the son of God, and getting close to Judaism. While raising psychological and theological questions it also enables an exploration of relations to Judaism among different groups and sects in Protestant (especially Evangelical) Christianity in America. The second discussion sparked by Jane's story relates to the interaction between liberal Jewry in the US and its newcomer converts that come from diverse

backgrounds—in this case, a convert who was involved with Messianic Judaism.

Before turning to Jane's story, a few remarks about my methodology and orientation in the research field—through the story of my own meeting with Jane. This research is based on a series of deep interviews and conversations with Jane and on additional materials I collected during my stay in the United States. During the two years in which I taught in the United States, I conducted participant-observations in the towns where I stayed. As an Israeli Jew abroad, being a participating member of these Jewish communities allowed me to keep connected to Jewish life. Yet the other community members were aware of the fact that I also have an anthropological interest in their communities as part of my wider interest in American Jewry. I conducted interviews with the rabbis and community members, including converts and different people who joined the community activities in which I took part. During this experience I met Jane, in a Reconstructionist synagogue I joined in a Midwestern college town.

We first met during the Jewish holidays of the Jewish month of *Tishrey*, 2013, "the High Holidays" as they are called by American Jews. We had an opportunity to have a long conversation on Yom Kippur. I do not drive during the fast of Yom Kippur, and she came from a different city. Therefore, we were almost the only people who stayed in the synagogue after the morning services. There were a couple of hours left until the next services (*Minha, Maariv and Ne'ila* prayers), so we decided to visit a nearby park. She told me she was completing a conversion process, and as we were walking I learned more about her background and about her experience among different churches and Messianic groups that emphasize differently their connection with Jews and Judaism. I was overwhelmed with the different denomination names she mentioned, and I was interested to know how she found herself in a Reconstructionist synagogue which was located far from her home.[3] Two months later, Jane performed the ritual of "*Aliyah Latora*"[4] for the first time, symbolizing the successful end of her conversion process.

During that year we gradually became good friends. Jane shared with me her personal experience and her insights. Both our mutual status as "newcomers" in the community, and being somehow different from the American Jews, brought us together. Jane once commented that it seemed as if she was able to talk to me, the outsider, in a different manner than to the local Jews despite the fact that the local Jewish community was known for its openness and informal style. She works as a teacher in the special

education field, yet she was gifted with an anthropological mindset. Therefore it is difficult to differentiate between my personal insights and those which have been received from her.[5] Jane also assisted me in collecting other important data for this research by connecting me with other members of Messianic communities in the US with whom I have corresponded. This article, however, was written after coming back to Israel, with distance allowing also additional understandings. Having laid down this foundation, I will turn now to the story of Jane.

From the Adventists to the Messianic Churches

Jane's path to Judaism passed through different groups who operate within the continuum that ranges from Protestant American Christian communities to different Messianic groups. Some of these communities were established communities with a long history, while others were new—groups who had dissented from existing churches and/or organized around charismatic leaders.[6] What all those groups had in common was their emphasis on the relationship with Judaism in general, or with specific Jewish components such as the use of Hebrew as a sacred Language.[7]

Jane grew up in the Midwest among the Seventh-Day Adventists, an established Christian church which sanctifies the Sabbath. As a young woman, she lived on the West Coast where she was introduced to and joined a Messianic community. When she returned to the Midwest, she could not find a similar community, and returned to her previous church, as it was the only place she could go to celebrate the Sabbath rituals.[8]

When a Messianic group began to operate in her area in the Midwest, she started going to their gatherings. However, she continued to attend some of the Adventists' gatherings since her husband remains a member of this church. This created a tension within her: she already developed a Messianic identity, and she believed that there is a special importance to the message from Romans 11, according to which the Jews will not be lost forever—the time will come in which they will accept Jesus and be saved.[9] There will be, she believed, a small time-frame (a "window of grace"), in which non-Jews will accept God and Jesus and the Jews will accept Jesus as well. This, she testified, was a "typical Messianic belief I had back then." However, the Adventists did not believe in this concept of "window of grace" for the Jews. When discussing the Gospel of Matthew or other gospels in the Adventist church, the discussion usually included expressions of anger towards the Jews. "I had a big issue with that—it was bothering", Jane recalled during a discussion we had. She feared the Adventists were moving themselves away from God with their harsh

critique of the Jews.[10] Jane felt an intense apprehension: "It made it uncomfortable for me to go to their ceremonies, or to any place where negative things are being said about the Jews."[11] She therefore remained only in the Messianic world. She spent fourteen years in that world altogether (1991-2004, from the birth of her daughter through her daughter's fourteenth year.) The participants in the Messianic group she joined, numbering in the hundreds, were mostly white Americans from a Christian background, though one of the founders came from a Jewish background. Approximately every three years the Messianic group splintered and its factions went off in different directions. At some point she raised criticism over this issue and confronted the leadership. She was told that as a woman she had no say in such issues.

The issue of her daughter's bat mitzvah had also aroused a disagreement between her and the community leaders. But since it was a very significant issue for Jane she went through with it without the leadership's consent, and her daughter learned and read the Torah on her own.[12]

Later on Jane was involved in another dispute between part of the Messianic group and yet another group called "Sacred Name." The latter emphasized the need to call God by his explicit name,[13] while the Messianic group claims it is forbidden, because if a Jew were to enter the room, he/she would leave immediately.[14] Jane felt that it was unfair not to be able to say God's explicit name and therefore started joining the meetings of "Sacred Names."

This incident made her inquire into the theological debates regarding the use of the name of God. "I went to their meetings, I did not say the explicit name of God, but they were tolerant towards me," she recalls. In this process she discovered that the name of God changed after the gospels. She learned that the spread of the gospels resulted in Jesus being as important as God and people started praying to Jesus instead of God. However, she discovered, this theological change occurred only in a later historical period. This process of inquiry brought Jane to question very basic theological dogmas of Christianity.

Jane described a specific visualization she had, which demonstrates these doubts. When the "Sacred Names" group sang about Jesus, she began feeling uncomfortable. She prayed, to understand why she felt that way, since "in the past," she said, "I could connect to it." In her prayers she saw an image of a pool-noodle, a long buoy that prevents people from drowning. She visualized people in the water who would surely drown if nothing were done to save them. God sent the buoy, she visualized, to save people from drowning, and as long as they grasped it they were safe. God

sent the buoy for them to connect to him, but instead the people started singing and praying to the buoy and enjoying it. These others needed to keep on holding on to the buoy to avoid getting into trouble, but as for Jane—she sat on the knees of God. From this vantage, if she wanted to glimpse the buoy, it would cause her to "have to look away from God." She felt that she understood after that vision that she could not talk to all those people about these issues. They, she understood, need to keep their faith, while she did not need to look at the "buoy" and therefore could and should not join them. The vision's message was very clear for Jane: she needed to find other people to talk to about the religious questions that were on her mind. Indeed, from then onwards Jane talked only with the Jews themselves,[15] though this too was a gradual process.

This part of Jane's story, which took place when she was a young woman, and the different denominations and groups she was in touch with, can be understood in the context of the tendency for internal splits within different Messianic groups. While a similar pattern has long existed among American Evangelical Protestants in general, it has become more and more evident in recent decades. Donald Miller sees it as one of the signs for "the new face of American Protestantism: "the leaders of these new paradigm churches are starting new movements, unbounded by denominational bureaucracy and the restraints of tradition—except the model of first-century Christianity".[16]

Theologically and historically both processes are intertwined: the ongoing internal splits among Protestant denominations in general and among the different Messianic churches in particular and the theological development of their attitudes towards Judaism and its commandments are all one inherent phenomenon. Messianic and "Jewish Messianic" churches are part of this wider tendency, and in their case, the interpretation of "first-century Christianity" can lead to new vague boundaries between Christianity and Judaism—in similarity with the situation among the "Judeo-Christians" of the first centuries. The development of such currents in recent decades has a strong effect on the way many dominations treat Jews and Israel.[17] But these undercurrents are usually a self-sustained inner discussion that usually does not have any direct connection with Jewish communities in the US. However, the way Jane continued her religious journey raises questions about the relationship between individual believers connected to these Messianic churches and the Jewish communities themselves. Here we might be seeing, especially in the American context, a new development.

Leaving Jesus: Getting Closer to Judaism and Connections with Jewish Communities

Jane's process of getting close to Judaism included new theological insights and involved experiencing visions. In this period Jane started experiencing a variety of theological doubts. She decided one day to attend a Conservative synagogue. I asked her how she knew about that synagogue. Jane answered that she had connections with other synagogues in town even before. She took Hebrew lessons with the Reform Jewish community and it is perhaps at that point that she heard about the Conservative synagogue. But, she adds, "Most member of Messianic groups know where the Jewish synagogues are."

She prayed in English while the rest of the synagogue prayed in Hebrew and had what she felt was a mystical experience. She described it as an aura in the form of rain that embraced her. She felt that the prayers in Hebrew had to do with protection and shelter, and that this was her way to reach what Christians call "connection to the Holy Spirit."

In this period she alternately attended both the Conservative Jewish synagogue and prayers with the Messianic congregation. While praying, she thought, among other things, "What would I believe if I were raised Jewish?" At a certain point she chose to celebrate the holidays according to the Jewish calendar (Messianic groups celebrate the holidays on different dates) and also wanted to go to the synagogue for the holidays. When she discussed this with the rabbi, she learned she could be a member of the Conservative Jewish congregation. She could come as part of what is termed "*Bene-Noah*"[18] as long as she promised not to preach to community members and pay a small membership fee. The synagogue already had, by then, a few "*Bene-Noah*" as community members. During this period Jane was troubled by the question of the fate of those who left the Messianic community, including those who started attending a synagogue. She prayed for them, as she was worried that it would damage their chances to be redeemed.

For a while, she went also to an African American Messianic congregation. [19] But as in other places, she felt uncomfortable when confronted with some things that were said there, such as anti-Jewish discourse. "I felt like a cat which is pulled in opposite directions," she recalls. The final straw came when she heard a sermon about the tribe of Judah in this African American Messianic congregation. The speaker claimed that Jews are not really Noah's offspring, but rather Yefet's, and that those who call themselves Jews are not who they claim to be. After that sermon, she stopped going there, and attended only the Conservative

synagogue. But actually, she says, "I continued being a Messianic Jew." It was an uncomfortable experience for her, because she understood she could not do much in the synagogue. "I was used to being very active before, on the board of directors, in the education of the community's children, etc.... I prayed over it."

She started attending different classes and met people that were in the conversion process. She herself chose to come to these classes, she stressed, while the others, "needed to attend." She read the Books of the Prophets in the Old Testament in order to "read the Prophets themselves, and to remove myself from the Christian mindset." While reading, she understood that many things she knew or quoted were actually taken out of their original context. Later on she joined a class that dealt with the Messiah. She was afraid she would find herself quickly converting to Judaism, because she believed that "If I deny Jesus, we would not be saved." That was a terrible thing to even think of, for her. However, to her great surprise, the problem was solved quickly:

> The first words the rabbi said in class were that there are different ways to look at the text. There is a literal way and there is "Midrash"—the interpretation. He, the rabbi, will talk about the Jewish and Christian interpretations. This quickly solved my dilemma as I don't need to worry: there are two ways to see things. I could see it as a Christian or take certain aspects from the Jewish interpretation but still view it in a Christian way. In this period I believed in perhaps only a quarter of what Christians believed in, and in all of what the Jews believed in.

"Is this a contradiction?" I asked her. She said it wasn't because the Messianic Jews did not actually believe in many things the rabbi described as "Christian" since the rabbi referred only to mainstream Christianity.

As the years went by, her connection to Judaism gradually became more distinct and clear. In addition to becoming an active non-Jewish member in a Conservative Jewish community in her city, she also participated in activities in the Reform community and established friendships with Jews in the synagogues she visited. During certain times she often volunteered in synagogue activities, for example, preparing food for *Kiddush*[20] and the meal after the Sabbath prayer. Jane also started assisting people who were in the process of conversion in the Conservative synagogue—people from a Christian, not Messianic, background. For example, she needed to help a woman from an Episcopalian background who used language that was, in essence, Christian. The woman had not noticed that she used such terms, but the rabbi did, and she needed help with it. She had been in the Conservative congregation for eleven years,

and though she wanted to convert she was unable to. The woman eventually left the Conservative synagogue and Jane introduced her to a Reform Synagogue.

Jane's theological process intersected with a personal crisis she was facing during this same period.[21] She was in the throes of a divorce and therefore, she explains, "I started thinking who I am, who I was, where should I be, am I sure I'm in the right place...?" When she devoted her prayers to these questions, she noticed more and more that there were things she could not do in the synagogue. She was less bothered with not being able to read the Torah, but other things did unsettle her. She joined a group that studied the Torah where people took turns in leading the discussion. When her turn came, she said that she was sure that the rabbi wouldn't want her to lead the discussion, since she was not Jewish but belonged to the "*Bene Noah.*" She states that the others in the group were shocked by the fact she was not Jewish and that their Rabbi might think such things.

In this period she started seeing a vision of a bridge between two cliffs. On one side was the Christian community, on the other side was the Jewish community, and between the two communities laid an abyss, a chasm.

> There were straight cliffs, and I was the one who could build the bridge between them. But the people from the Messianic community, or those who had problems with the Jewish or Christian communities, could not see me. They were pushed down from the cliffs by the Jewish Rabbi or the Christian priest. In that sense there was no difference between the two. The people could hold on at the edge of the cliff, but not for long. And I, at least, could throw them a rope, to keep them hanging somewhere, or to help them land where they feel they could belong...

At a certain point, Jane tried to visit the "Sacred Names" group, to determine if perhaps she still had a connection with them. She found that the group had split up due to a disagreement: a part of the group used Jewish prayers, and the other side argued that using Jewish prayers caused people to convert to Judaism. Part of the group went on to lean more toward Christianity, and the other part, approximately thirty people, became a group of Noahides. They contacted a Hassidic Chabad Rabbi from the area who came once a week to teach them.[22] When she visited the Noahides from her previous group, they were reading texts that went against the proselytizing of Jews by Messianic groups. She started reading the texts with them and found that they had reached similar conclusions to hers. For them, Jesus was the bridge that helped them move from their

previous experiences to the present ones, but "if one passes a bridge to reach a certain destination, why carry on focusing on Jesus and not the destination itself?" These ideas led this group closer to the study of Judaism.

Jane was bolstered by the fact that the Noahide group was going through similar struggles, but she still harboured a lot of anger. She told me that she was considering a new direction—joining Reform Judaism.

> Many friends there told me— "why don't you convert? You know much more than us. You come here more often than us..." There was someone there that asked me: "do you need to refer to Jesus at all? You just have to refer to the Messiah".

Conversion: Institutionalized Difficulties on the Road to Judaism

While previously Jane had believed that it was impossible for her to convert, after her reunion with the Noahides she started considering the possibility that this might not be the case. She decided to drive to a Reconstructionist synagogue which was located in another city—an hour's drive from her house. Jane claims she gained this insight through her prayers and the answers to them. The very first time she visited the synagogue she was offered to perform an *Aliyah*—a reading of a portion of the Torah. She knew that according to tradition she must refuse since she was not Jewish, but she felt that it was something she was missing, something she really wanted to do. The rabbi was surprised that she was not a Jew since she knew all the prayers and sang with everyone. He asked twice to talk with her, both in the prayer and also afterwards, just before the Kiddush. When she approached him to take her leave he asked her again what her situation was. Jane saw that as a sign: he approached her three times. She knew the Talmudic tradition that states one needs to ask three times to convert before being accepted, and connected the Rabbi's three requests to that tradition. When she told him she was a Messianic Jew he offered to continue the conversation in his office.[23] He then told her that it was up to her—he did not see any reason why she could not convert to Judaism. Jane told me that it was clear to the rabbi from her story that her doubts all pointed to a conclusion she had already reached: Jesus is not God.

Following the meeting with that rabbi, Jane felt that she could convert, but her initial attempts did not go well. Back in her home town, she first approached a Conservative rabbi in the community where she was already

active. However the rabbi refused to convert her after a phone interview. He asked her three questions. The first question—if Jesus was a god, she answered "no." But when he asked her if Jesus saved her in any way, she kept silence and told him she must explain her answer. The rabbi said that the explanation did not matter—if she thought Jesus saved her then he could not convert her, but he would not prevent her from converting elsewhere.

"What did you want to explain to him?" I asked her in the interview. Her answer was this: "Basically, that I would not be in Judaism unless I had the connection with Jesus—that he was my connection from one world to the other...I basically grew up with Jesus since I was child till I came to Judaism—and if this is not saving me, what is it?" Jane added that the people in the synagogue's board of directors, some of them converts themselves, did not agree with the rabbi. They told her that they weren't asked such questions. However, after this incident, it was clear for her that her place was not in that synagogue.

At this point Jane reminded me of her vision of the abyss between the Christian and Jewish worlds, and said that this was the reason it was so important to her that I tell her story. "It is important, because as long as people won't understand this, there will always be people that will be lost in this abyss..."

Later, Jane returned to the Reconstructionist rabbi and began the conversion process. The rabbi's background assisted Jane's conversion: he himself spent years in groups with a Buddhist orientation before reconnecting to his Jewish roots and going to Rabbinic school. The rabbi's interest in different spiritual paths and his openness allowed him to see that her request for conversion was sincere. He was less frightened when she told him about her "former relations with Christ," as long as she stressed that things had changed, and she saw it as a mere step in her process.

Jane's conversion process took about a year. She set the schedule with the rabbi, and finally went through a formal conversion process. The process included an official religious court meeting with a few Reformed and Conservative rabbis and baptism in the *Mikveh*. In the court proceeding, the rabbi introduced her story, including her shifts from the Adventists to the Messianic Jews. He told the other rabbis that she studied with him and passed through "theological mindset changes." The court asked about the Adventists and the Messianic Jews and where she was at the moment. The final question asked if she felt herself part of a people now, to which she answered: "I did feel a part of a people—and not until I was in Young Israel" (the community she joined). She stressed that they

emphasized that question and were happy to hear that she had found her place.

The rabbinic court's last question raises an important discussion point: to what extent does conversion to Judaism mean joining a religion, or is it joining a nation? And what is the connection between the two? In this specific case, when I asked Jane this question, she responded clearly: her conversion was in her eyes, at first, a process of joining a religion. In other words, it was a result of a religious change, theological in its nature. But later on, the question of joining a nation, a people, and even beforehand, a community, became very significant for Jane.

It is not only that the answer of the question "joining a religion" or/and "joining a people" changed with time. Actually, the whole journey that Jane went through was a long process of getting closer to Judaism (unlike some views of conversion as a sudden change).[24] Formal conversion was an important step in this long process that started long before Jane began her formal learning for conversion.

In this case (as with other cases in the communities where I conducted my fieldwork), the formal conversion had an importance both for the converts, as well as for the community itself. The formal conversion by the religious court, followed by the ceremony of *Aliyah* (ritual reading of the Torah on *Shabbat*) in the community were a clear signal that Jane became a community member with equal rights, including ritual rights. For Jane, the importance of the event was not focused on her personal feelings—she already felt Jewish before—but in her ability to feel that she belonged to a Jewish community and her ability to be a full participant in all their religious activities. Following her conversion, Jane felt also that the people from the Jewish community in her city changed their attitude towards her. The sign for this change was the invitation she got during a pray to do the *Gelila*—"rolling up" and binding the Torah with a sash in order to place it back in the Torah's cover. This invitation happened in the same Conservative synagogue where the rabbi previously refused to convert her.

Joining a Community: Between Conversion and Social Acceptance

As of the time of editing this article (2015), Jane had already been a member of the synagogue community that I call here "Young Israel" (YI) for three years. Though she lives further away, she is more active than many others of its members. In the way prayers and rituals are conducted, this synagogue has a more Conservative character than other Liberal

synagogues she used to pray in, but with a feeling of openness and a very pluralistic and liberal attitude. The community members themselves lead the prayers. A central place is given to the Hebrew language. The community officially belongs to the Reconstructionist movement in Judaism, but some of its members see themselves as Conservatives, and the Sabbath prayers alternate between these two traditions. About 45% of their members are converts or mixed families (with one of the partners being a non-Jew.) The community has a permissive approach towards the participation of non-Jews in their ceremonies: non-Jews are equal partners (except for the *Aliyah*), and the synagogue even permits mixed couples (one Jew, one non-Jew) to perform a joint reading of the Torah (*Aliyah*). The synagogue holds bar mitzvah ceremonies for children of mixed couples that have a Jewish father, not only those who have a Jewish mother.

However, progressive as the community is, someone like Jane, who has no "ethnic" or family relations with Jews, remained in many ways an outsider. Socio-economically, too, Jane stuck out, being different than most other community members who were connected to the nearby campus or were employed as professionals. The community had other ex-Christians who had converted, and also Christians that married Jews and chose not to convert. But Jane's Messianic background was exceptional, and though the community was relatively open-minded, Jane felt she should not emphasize it.

We should pay attention to the differentiation between formal acceptance in the community (participation, joining the prayers, etc.) and social acceptance. Though many non-Jewish people join in the synagogue services and events, this does not mean they have meaningful relations with the community outside these events. Among the communities I observed in the university towns I stayed in there was an important place for the activities of smaller groups, such as "*Havorah*", a product of the group culture of the 1970s. Such a "*Havorah*" usually meets once a month on Friday nights, and on holidays. Though the community has a liberal and open façade, it is not easy for people from a different ethnic, cultural, or even socio-economic background who join the community to join these circles. This can demonstrate that though the community is open-minded towards non-Jews, and though non-Jews participate as community members, an actual "acceptance" might be a long process, and formal conversion has significance as an important step to full membership.

Jane's case is interesting also with regard to this level of "joining" a community. In her first year as a member, Jane celebrated Passover eve on her own, even though there is a clear communal ethos of inviting members

over on holidays. In her second year, after her formal conversion (though not necessarily as a direct result of it), she was invited for the Seder dinner at Passover. The couple that invited her, both professors in the university, were very active and had a central standing in the community. The wife, who often led the prayers and read from the Torah, was herself from a Christian background (though her family had a Jewish background too) and converted at a young age, when she met her spouse. Jane came to the Seder dinner with an African American friend from her city who was interested in Judaism and sometimes joined her for services.

Jane knows very well the gap between formally joining the synagogue and even converting to Judaism, and a real feeling of social acceptance. She took a role of assisting new converts that came after her. She often visits the Liberal Jewish communities in her city, with which she reconnected. In these communities, she is not only in touch with the Jewish members, but also with others, some being her long-time acquaintances, who are interested in Judaism. Jane, therefore, indeed became a sort of bridge between worlds.

Keeping Connection with the Christian World: Jane as a Connector between Worlds

While some people upon having a religious conversion disconnect from their previous world, Jane maintains some of these connections. She sees great importance in creating mechanisms of connection between Christians interested in Judaism and her current Jewish world. Her friends are not necessarily Jews: she often brings to prayer a friend who is interested in Judaism. She also keeps in touch with some of the Messianic groups she was connected with in the past and visits other communities, such as the African American-Jewish community in Chicago, who see themselves as Jews. Some of her connections with Christians are due to the fact that many of her close relatives—her daughter, for example, are non-Jews. But in her connections with Christians she is not different from many other community members with Jewish backgrounds in her synagogue, since they too often have close family connections with Christians.

Jane and people like her constitute a new and different point of connection between the Messianic-Christian worlds and the Liberal Jewish worlds in the US. Actually, there are others with various points of connection. One example I have heard is from Amy, with whom Jane connected me. Amy belongs to a group that began as Messianic Jews, then as Noahides, but then continued in a process of becoming closer to

Judaism. While Jane converted, they started to see themselves as "*Gerim*" (a biblical word referring to convert—but also to people who live among Jews). Following visits to Israel, some of them hope one day to go through Orthodox-Jewish conversion in the National-Orthodox Israeli tradition that they feel connected to.

Discussion: Jews, Messianic Christianity, and the American "Religious Field"

Jane's story is one example of a dynamic and rich world of individuals and groups that come from a Christian background but see themselves as close to Jews and Judaism. Many converts from Christian background accept the Jewish presumption that Judaism and Christianity are fundamentally different due to a clear boundary between them. As a contrast, the case of the Messianic groups raises questions regarding these distinct boundaries. It seems that in the past, although many Messianic groups saw themselves as "Jews", the boundaries between them and other Jews were quite clear. However, new processes of getting closer to Judaism among some members of these groups challenge these "taken for granted" distinctions.

Groups, and also individuals, with a Messianic background were viewed once by many Jews as a threat to Judaism, much more than other Christians. This fear was not irrational, as there were Messianic groups that aimed to convert Jews. However, from this case study we can learn also of an opposite process—of becoming closer to Judaism, and even leading to conversion, a process that starts with the adaptation of Messianic Christian ideologies. Though the number of people or groups who go through a similar process is still relatively small, it seems that the current case study is not unique—and there are other similar cases in North America. This process has theological aspects, but in order to fully understand it, we should locate it in relation to the current position of Liberal American Jewry, and in relation to different transformations in the "American religion field".

I opened this article with a description that demonstrates how the Messianic place of worship is perceived as just another synagogue, in the eyes of a woman from a Christian background who prays in a Liberal Jewish synagogue. For this woman, there is no major difference between interest and willingness to "try out" religious experiences offered by Liberal synagogues in the city or by a Messianic community that stresses its closeness to Judaism. But the important issue here is not necessarily the "different" Jewish identity stressed in both options, but, in a way, the

contrary, the almost "natural" place of both Messianic and Liberal Jewish congregations in the current American social and cultural world.

In the United States, Liberal synagogues (and sometimes also Chabad centres in places where there is no Hassidic community) are perceived as part of the local American religious field. This process can be seen as part of a larger and long-term process of acceptance and consolidation of Judaism, especially Liberal Judaism, in the US. Robert Bellah indicated Judaism's place as part of the American "civil religion".[25] With the wider general phenomenon of the return of religion in general to centre stage in the last few decades, this symbolic place of Jews in civic society, together with their image as a successful group, is manifested also in a process in which synagogues have already long ago became an integral and local part of the American "religious field".

Moreover, although cases of "joining the Jewish people" can be seen more and more around the globe, it is important to emphasize the specific American context: this particular case represents first and foremost a North American and Protestant phenomenon. First, ideological developments among several Christian congregations which denounce the traditional Christian "theology of replacement"[26] contributed to the processes described above of proximity between Christians and Jews in the United States. But additional changes in the American religious landscape also contribute to this process. The diversification of the religious landscape actually reinforces the proximity between Judaism and Christianity. With more awareness of the existence of mosques as well as Buddhist and Hindu temples in the American religious landscape,[27] Jewish synagogues became more similar and "local". The Jews' social status and financial success might add an element of attraction for Christians toward Judaism, but the common theological basis, from a Christian perspective, has primal importance. Hence, Jewish Reform temples and Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues are perceived in a different manner than temples of Asian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Moreover, this structural situation also stresses some attractive features of Jewish rituals. It allows for a connection between localism, on the one hand, and a connection to the authenticity of the Israelites, to the Hebrew language, and even to the state of Israel, on the other. In some places and environments this development is sometimes supported, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, also by the political and theological perceptions of different Evangelical churches towards Israel, and even their presence in Israel itself.[28]

With all of these connections in mind, this case study demonstrates the interesting ability of individuals, and maybe even groups, to cross a

border, a certain threshold, in the process of getting close to Judaism. What seems to be a clear-cut ethnic and religious boundary from a Jewish point of view is less so in a broader examination of American society.

Perhaps this possibility to cross borders has also to do with the processes that American Jews themselves are going through at the same time. Among the Jews, there is a constant process of dialogue with their surroundings, and as part of that, a growing openness to non-Jews who come to their synagogues. Though this openness is not without dilemmas and a complex inner discussion on the meaning of religious boundaries, it is a process that Liberal Jewish communities are going through. These two processes (openness of Christians towards Judaism and the openness of Jewish Americans to accept non-Jews in their communities) affect also the special position of Messianic groups. This is echoed also in the dynamic and theological disagreement described above among some Messianic groups as to the way they should perceive and react towards Jews and "traditional" Judaism. This bending and shifting, however, is currently happening only in the margins, while the abyss (at least from a Jewish perspective) between Jews and Messianic groups, is not less vivid. After all, the very existence of these groups is threatening due to the blurring of boundaries between Judaism and Christianity that Messianic groups create.

Is This a New Phenomenon? Between Christians and Jews: Past and Present

Globalization processes create a connection between the phenomena described in this paper and other contemporary cases related to joining the Jewish people. At the same time, it is necessary also to view this case through a historical lens, and to compare it to conversions to Judaism in previous eras.

While the historical connections between Judaism and Christianity are clear, we tend to see them as separate systems in terms of religion and society. However, in different periods and in different places, there have been groups that have undermined this notion of separateness. Hence, there are some similarities between the phenomena described here and other cases—both cases of individual conversion from Christianity and cases of Christian groups or sects that went through processes of Judaising, which sometimes also included conversions. According to Yaakov Katz, "we cannot determine what was the number of Christians who have become Jews, neither what was the frequency of this phenomenon, but it is clear that it happened again and again in the Middle

Ages in Ashkenaz…"[29] In a theological dimension, such occurrences stem from a process in which individuals and groups gradually get closer to Judaism as part of a process of search for biblical "authenticity."[30] Katz states that "[k]nowledgeable people among the Christians had a tendency to make deep investigation in question of religion, and they might have come to the conclusion that the Jewish tradition was the right interpretation of the Old Testament, the foundation of both Christianity and Judaism".[31]

While Katz described this theoretically as a pure intellectual process, it seems that historically this process had more chances to occur among marginal groups or individuals, or, if not marginal, in the context of groups who were far from mainstream Christianity (in their place and era). Some analogy can be found also in the case of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Subbotniks (and the "*Gerim*")[32]groups in tsarist Russia, and also with the story of the Judaised in the southern Italian town of San Nicandro.[33] In the Protestant context, we can tie the described phenomena to the dynamics involved with the basic principle of reading a sacred text "as it is." It also can be tied to the dynamics of ongoing splits and sub-splits, so common in the development of some Protestant churches in North America.

The current wave of "getting close to Judaism" can be seen as a continuation of similar tendencies to search for religious authenticity, though it also has new elements. Although there are similarities to other historical cases, especially in the context of the quest for biblical authenticity, I would like to suggest that there are also new developments that are worthy of attention in the current case study.

First, thanks to technological innovations—mainly the internet and social media, new possibilities for communication make our phenomenon unique in another way when compared to how people joined Judaism in previous periods. While in the past getting closer to the Jewish people often depended on a specific dynamic of interaction with the Jews in a specific environment, today there are different ways to do so. One can interact with various Jewish communities in a certain geographical space, but then convert in a different congregation, as Jane did. Another option is to reach out to different Jewish organizations and activities as in the case of Amy. The new technologies allow more options of moving between different communities and hearing different ideas.

Second, in the specific case I put forth here, the formal conversion still holds an important role as a symbolic point of entry to Judaism and the Jewish people. This is different from cases of "Judaised" groups. The conversion, in this case, was also a moment when a question of

"belonging" was raised—to a community and also to a people, beyond the religious realm per se. At the same time, it is interesting that the conversion in this case is not recognized by the Israeli state.[34] I suggest that conversion, in this case, only opens an option of joining the Jewish people. In a broader level, analytically we should distinguish between joining Judaism as a religion, and "joining the Jewish people". Moreover, the existence of different waves of groups and individuals who get closer to Judaism should not be understood automatically as "joining the Jewish people". Rather, it opens a door to explore the option to join the Jews as people. In some cases this option (which required an additional process) is achieved, but not necessarily always.

The examples I have described in this research point to understanding the religious search (that can result in getting close to Judaism) that combines a process of seeking "theological authenticity" with a search for a feeling of community. These cases of joining Judaism include, I argue, processes of joining a community, and even joining the "Jewish people," even if the initial motivation for the process was more oriented towards joining Judaism as a religion.

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Notes

[1] Messianic groups need to be analysed in a wider framework of Protestantism in general, and specifically of Evangelical groups. For a discussion of the main developments in these churches, see James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). In this research I use the "Messianic churches" deliberately in a vague way to describe various new groups which blend together Christianity and (at least some) Jewish elements. These include Jewish Messianic groups, but focus more on groups with a majority of non-Jews, mostly people with Christian backgrounds who left their churches (often Protestant, but also others) and joined these new groups. Members of many of these groups see themselves as "Messianic Jews". I use "groups" here since it enables us to imagine a wide range of organizations: from more traditional churches to different small and medium size groups. Some of these groups might have what Miller calls "post-modern sect" characteristics and "sect-denomination framework" (See Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism Christianity in the New Millennium.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 11, 153-155). By these terms, Miller means that these groups demand from their members exclusivity and some aspects of separation from the influence of the wider society. The use of "groups" means that not all these organizations are sect-like. In addition, "sects" should be understood without the typical negative associations often associated with this term. Moreover, as Miller stresses, these kinds of "sects" can develop into "denominations".

[2] For a description of these groups from a Christian point of view see: Bruce J. Lieske, *The Messianic Congregational Movement*, Christian Research Institute. (http://www.equip.org/article/the-Messianic-congregational-movement). Lieske states that "Most of these new Messianic congregations, although clearly Jewish in their identity, are within the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy. Others emphasize Jewishness more than Jesus and the New Covenant, and still others are cultic". The ecclesia, still predominantly Gentile, is challenged to understand new biblical emphases in this movement, such as the celebration of traditional Jewish festivals."

[3] The synagogue was more than an hour away from the city she lived in, while her city had a Jewish community and several synagogues to choose from.

[4] The Torah is read every Sabbath in Jewish synagogues. The honour of reciting the blessings over the Torah is called an *aliyah* (plural, *aliyot*), which means "going up." This refers both to the physical ascent of the person to the *bimah* where the Torah is read and to the spiritual uplifting associated with participation in this hallowed ritual. Only Jews are allowed to perform the *Aliyah* (see: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/aliyah/).

[5] Compare to the experience of William Whyte with "Doc": William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), Appendix A.

[6] Messianic congregations (mostly Evangelical in their sources) are a relatively new phenomenon, which started especially after the 1967 war in the Middle East. Messianic churches are not mentioned in studies of American Christianity from the 1970s (for examples see: Sydney, E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972)., Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark Leone P. *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974.).

[7] Developments in relations to Jews and Judaism are connected to the appearance of "Christian Zionism". Stephan Sizer states that contemporary Christian Zionism may be classified "not only in terms whether it is covenantal or dispensational, but also as to whether it is primarily evangelistic or political. See Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 97. The later (evangelical) is more relevant to current discussion, although the influence of the political dimension of Christian Zionism is also part of the field.

[8] On the development of the idea of keeping the Sabbath among Seventh-Day Adventists and its roots see Ahlstrom, *A Religious* History, 174, 387, 480.

[9] "God did not reject his people, which he foreknew", Paul's Letter to the Romans 11:2.

[10] Jane stated that "Paul's Letter to the Romans 11 also has a verse that says that the gentile must not believe they are better than the Jews just because the Jews don't believe in Jesus. If they do so, the verse states, they will be the branches that will be cut off forever." "It is a warning," Jane told me, "the ceremonies at the Adventist churches reminded me of that". She added that with the Adventists the Jews were always criticized, "even when discussing the Sabbath."

[11] Compare Sizer's discussion of Anti-Semitism and American liberal Christian Zionism: Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 80-84.

[12] This refers to the reading of the *Parasha*—portion of the Torah read traditionally during bar-mitzvah (thirteen-year-old boys), and read also by girls during bat-mitzvah (twelve-year-old girls) among Conservative and Reform Jews. This experience, hence, show Jane's inclination towards American Liberal Judaism.
[13] In Judaism the pronunciation of God's name (four Hebrew characters, translated to English as Jehovah) is taboo.
[14] Jane, in another interview, was cynical with respect to that argument, saying: "as if there weren't enough other reasons for a Jew to leave..."
[15] By "talk" Jane refers here to having meaningful theological discussions. In other words, Jane wants to stress here that from this moment Jews became her main address and partners to discuss religious concerns.
[16] Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism Christianity*, 11.
[17] Sizer, *Christian Zionism*.
[18] *Benei-Noha* (Noahides) is a term for non-Jews who keep the seven biblical lows of Noah. The context here is a status given to gentiles who want to join the congregation in some American liberal communities (The term is used also by in different contexts by specific Messianic groups, and also by the Chabad movements who have different outreach projects to non-Jews). See also Yaakov Ariel's article in this volume.
[19] It seems that Jane refers here to rather new African American Jewish (Messianic?) synagogues and not to older organizations of African American Jews, but it is not certain. See: Jacob S. Dorman, *Chosen People: the Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Yvonne Patricia Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, eds., *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[20] Kiddush—blessing on wine, here: a Sabbath Kiddush, done after the prayer, before the Sabbath meal.
[21] The possible connections between conversion and personal psychological crisis were discussed by William James. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature*. (Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2008), chapter 9.
[22] Chabad late leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, launched "the global Noahide Campaign". See:
http://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/466119/jewish/The-Seven-Noahide-Laws.htm and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noahidism
(retrieved 27.12.2015).
[23] The office offered more privacy: the Rabbi, hence, recognized the tension in this situation, but unlike other Rabbis (see below), it did not prevent him to continue checking her situation.
[24] See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, chapter 9.
[25] Robert N, Bellah, "Civil Religion in America". *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967):, 1-21. Bellah discusses the Hebraic characteristics of earlier symbolism of the civil religion, but also stresses that the later development of civil religion embraces monotheism, which is characteristic of both the Christian and Jewish religions.
[26] The idea that the Christians replace the Jews as the true "people of Israel".

[27] Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 259.
[28] Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 202, 205.
[29] Yaakov Katz, *Between Jews and Gentiles*. (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1960), 84. Katz studies the relations between Jews and Gentiles in the Middle Ages. "Ashkenaz" in this context refers to the German-speaking areas in Europe.
[30] In the Protestant context there are some manifestations of these tendencies also in cases such as the Judaising of the "*Bne Menashe*" in North East India, and the Judaising of different African groups. In both cases the Judaising process most likely stems (also) from Protestant missionaries, and, although there are big differences, in all these cases, the way some Christian influences were accepted by the locals influenced their attraction to Judaism.
[31] Katz, *Between Jews and Gentiles*, 86.
[32] Subbotniks (Субботники, literally, Sabbatarians) are Russian Orthodox groups which went through a process of Judaising in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. See Velvl Chernin, *The Subbotniks* (Ramat Gan: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality, Bar Ilan University, 2007). Gerim (or Gery in Russian) are Subbotnik converts to Rabbinic Judaism (ibid., 7).
[33] The main process of Judaising in San Nicandro happened in the 1930s to 1940s. See John Anthony Davis, *The Jews of San Nicandro* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010).
[34] Although authorized by the *Bet-Din* (religious court) which includes Conservative Rabbis, the Reconstructionist Rabbi who guided the conversion said that his conversions are not recognized by Israeli official bodies.