

Topel, Marta. *Jerusalem and São Paulo: the new Jewish orthodoxy in focus*. xv, 193 pp. glossary, bibliogr. index. Lanham MD, Plymouth (UK): University Press of America, 2008 NP (paper).

Although hardly a new phenomenon, certain qualitative and quantitative features of mass conversion in the last half century have destabilized assumptions about the stability of religious traditions and institutions, and now, surprisingly for some, this has affected Judaism. The apparent convergence in the concept and process of conversion among different religious traditions has of course raised the question whether we are in the presence of a phenomenon peculiar to our time which might somehow define religiosity in contemporary societies, rather than peculiar to particular religions.

This book is a case study which casts valuable light on the extraordinary wave of conversion-style movements which have brought about wide-ranging changes in Jewish culture and structures since about the 1960s. The word 'conversion-style movements' is used because, obviously, these are movements not to convert non-Jews but rather to campaign among secularized, liberal or simply 'lost' Jews. The aim of this campaigning is not just to bring them back into the fold but to channel them to a strict, Orthodox, or ultra-Orthodox, way of life – because for these evangelists Reform or Liberal Judaism simply do not qualify as Judaism at all. The subjects of this trend, which, better than a campaign, could be described as a sustained and ever-growing process of institutional implantation, are often described, in English, as returnees, but in this study Marta Topel simply uses the word 'converts'. The importance among returnees of a fundamental change in one's outlook, and in the most intimate details of one's daily life, justify its use not only among Jews but also among Muslims where a similar phenomenon has taken hold.

Although there have been previous studies of this aspect of contemporary Judaism, the innovations brought by Marta Topel's study (originally published in 2005 by Topbooks, Rio de Janeiro as *Jerusalém y São Paulo: a nova ortodoxia judaica em cena*) are several: firstly it is set not in the customary locations of New York or Israel, but in Brazil, a place where the Jewish population is highly secularized and well integrated with a broader society, where multicultural markers are not institutionalized as they are in those places, and where religious affiliation is not a prime carrier of those markers. Secondly, the writing navigates a delicate course between the analytical language of social science and the jargon of the Rabbis, and without the preciousness of overbearing reflexivity. Thirdly, compared with studies of conversion in Christian and Muslim contexts, being set in the prosperous neighbourhoods of São Paulo, this is not a portrayal of victimhood, and perhaps as a result focuses on the intimacies of conversion trajectories rather than on the social ills and cultural dislocations which seem to offer a straightforward explanation of conversion in Christian and Muslim contexts. The context makes it more difficult than usual to portray conversion as a symptom or a side-effect, compelling the author to take the words of her subjects – comfortably off and well integrated as they are - as statements of true belief. This she does with admirable skill.

The setting for the study is the São Paulo upper middle class and the subjects are men and women from lay or liberal backgrounds who have gravitated towards a life of strict observance. The analysis gains thickness and conviction from the inclusion of the convert's close family, the Rabbis, their wives and organizations which have worked to promote the return (*tshuva* – a term variously translatable as 'repentance' or 'an answer') of Jews for some three or four decades in Brazil.

The Rabbis were originally sent to Brazil to work among what was to them a Jewish population which had been almost lost to irreligion. Stories of their travels through the country attempting, with very slowly increasing success, literally to attach identity markers to tiny groups in provincial cities, or to the members of Jewish or 'Ebraico' country clubs, provide a starting point as we watch the slow build up of an institutional presence, in schools and adult education. Theirs is very much a family business: the Rabbis' wives are as deeply involved as their husbands, not least because much of the proselytism involves inviting people to their own home for Sabbath and holiday meals. This in turn points to a crucial aspect of Jewish (re)conversion – that it involves little theological indoctrination and definitely not the sort of thunderbolt of illumination which is associated with Protestant conversion. On the contrary, the individual is gradually drawn in to a new way of life, through close social contact and also through a quasi-epidemic internalization of an infinity of detailed regulations governing dress, food, and the management of the body. Behind this effort there lies, to be sure, large-scale charitable support and the dense institutional heritage of the Chassidic sects.

Sometimes the individuals explain their decisions in spiritual terms with which a social scientist is uncomfortable, yet they also do so as if they were describing a rational and carefully considered decision, which evolves into a tightly bounded rationality. The book does not gloss over the costs and pain of the conversion process, especially for women: the detailed description of the gradual induction of novices – mature women accustomed to freedoms which they now regard as some sort of slavery - is not for the squeamish, as it dwells on the moral or physical trials to which they subject themselves, or to which they are subjected when close kin convert: subjects describe 'intricate' even 'disagreeable' methods of counting the seven days of cleanliness leading up to the total immersion in the ritual bath which marks the end of an Orthodox woman's monthly ten-day (or more) separation from her husband. And space is also given to the severe moral pain inflicted on families by some young people in their adoption of a new way of life: when the mother of one such young man goes to enormous trouble to prepare an acceptable meal for him in the family home which he now barely visits, he rejects it on the grounds that 'it was a gentile who lit the stove' - outlandish even for the ultra-Orthodox. The mother breaks down in tears.

Topel has taken great trouble to transliterate Hebrew phrases and also to provide translations and explanations for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with the culture – and even the cognoscenti will still find new things here. Conversion Jewish-style is not a mere object of curiosity. Nowadays, it even has political implications because converts are so prominent as Jewish activists, pro-Israel activists and in spearheading of some of

Israel's sharpest political edges. The author's unique balance of sensitivity and analytical framing has enabled her to shed valuable light on what is now a central feature of both world religions and contemporary Judaism. This gem of a study is, in short, an excellent contribution to our understanding of conversion in general and of the ever more multifaceted culture of -contemporary Judaism in particular.

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