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Chosen People Ministries and its Place within the Larger Context of Evangelical Missions to the Jews¹

Yaakov Ariel

We would have probably not paid much attention to the early history of the Chosen People Ministries, and to Leopold Cohen, the founder of the mission, if it were not for the energy and resourcefulness of his son, Joseph Hoffman Cohn. It was Joseph Cohn, who turned his father's successful neighborhood mission into one of the largest and most influential global enterprises in the history of Jewish evangelization. Understanding the different roles of Leopold and Joseph Cohn and the contexts in which they operated is important to the understanding of the early history of the mission, and the significance of the different stages in its development.

¹ Unable to attend the conference in person, Dr. Ariel's contribution here consists of the transcription of his lecture delivered via skype, plus responses to questions posed by those in attendance – editor's note.



At the beginning of Leopold Cohn's career, at turn of the twentieth century New York, Cohn was one among many. There were dozens of missionaries who labored among the Jewish immigrant community in the New York area. However, Leopold proved to be more successful than most other missionaries were. Obtaining his theological education in Scotland and settling in Williamsburg, New York, the founder of what would become the Chosen People Ministries was more systematic, resilient and perseverant than other missionaries. As Cohn's mission grew and expanded, it also attracted envy, resentment and defamation, but its benefactors stood by Cohn and lent him their support.

One major element that worked in favor of the mission was its leader's ability to gain the trust of and build lasting connections with Protestant groups and individuals who showed interest in supporting missionary work among the Jews and turned into benefactors of the mission. It helped that the mission was successful in the number of converts it made, pointing to a good understanding on the part of Cohn and his lieutenants of the aspirations of potential converts, who visited his mission, heard sermons, and explored spiritual and communal options. Long before the rise of Messianic Judaism, missionaries labored on a one-on-one basis to bring young Jewish immigrants to accept the Christian faith, paying individual attention to every inquirer.

Leopold Cohn and later on Joseph Cohn's real achievement resulted therefore from realizing the real nature of missions as two-fold agencies: propagating the Christian faith in its Protestant Messianic form among Jews, and at the same time advocating in the Protestant community the importance of the Jews in God's plan of redemption and the need to evangelize them. In that, they followed in the footsteps of earlier Protestant missions.

EARLIER HISTORY

Although by the twentieth century it became the hub of such missions, Protestant missions to the Jews did not start in America. From the very beginning of Protestantism, its proponents wished to bring the Jews to accept Christianity in its new Protestant form. Martin Luther took great interest in evangelizing the Jews, as did other Protestant leaders. German Protestants were the first to establish, as early as at the turn of the eighteenth century, missions directed specifically at Jews. The first Protestant house of converts was located in Hamburg. However, it was the Halle Pietists who established the first systematic mission to the Jews in the early eighteenth century. The Pietists studied Jewish texts, wrote tracts to introduce Jews to the Christian faith, recruited, trained and sent missionaries to visit Jewish communities, talked and argued with Jews over the right interpretation of scriptures, and reported to the mission about Jewish life in Eastern and Central Europe as they encountered it. Further Pietist missionaries came about in Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Holland.

The rise of the evangelical movement in Britain in the late eighteenth century brought with it growing interest in evangelizing the Jews. In the early nineteenth century the London Society for promoting Christianity amongst the Jews became a leading mission, establishing dozens of missionary posts around the globe. British missions proliferated throughout the nineteenth century, representing various denominations, regions and approaches of British Protestantism.

Attempts at creating missions in America did not work well at first. There were a few attempts at establishing missions to the Jews, but until the 1880s, proponents of evangelism did not succeed in creating solid lasting institutions.

Leopold Cohn has come to represent a new wave of missions,



some of which have endured, with changes and adjustments, to this day. The initial paradigm that the missions followed was British. It was, perhaps, not a coincidence that Leopold Cohn received theological education and training as a missionary in Britain. In tracts that he wrote on Christian themes for interested Jews, he proved to possess good theological knowledge and ability to transmit it to people who had not been familiar with Christian tenets of faith. He helped bring the Pietist-British missionary tradition of evangelizing the Jews, to America.

Albert E. Thompson, in *A Century of Missions*, which he published in the early twentieth century, recorded dozens of missions: British, European-Continental, Middle-Eastern and others. It showed that America joined the wagon towards the end of the nineteenth century as a vital, dynamic, and successful force in the field.

THE RISE OF A MISSION

A local endeavor at first, one among the many, Leopold Cohn's mission grew and prospered. Joseph, his son, studied at the evangelical Moody Bible Institute, gaining a good understanding of the Protestant community, its attitudes, and manners, and saw himself as a crusader for an appreciative position towards Jews and the cause of missions to that people. Throughout the years, he turned the mission into the largest in the field of Mission to the Jews at that time, venturing out on an international level. The Cohns established excellent connections with benefactors in the Protestant community, raised funds, expanded, produced literature, and facilitated the conversion of a relatively large number of Jews. However, just as important was the fact that they understood the place and culture in which they were operating.

The time and place were ripe for the rise and growth of missions to the Jews directed towards the evangelization of Jews. The social and religious developments in America at the turn of the twentieth century worked in favor of Leopold and Joseph Cohn's enterprise. To fully understand the realities in which the mission operated, one should therefore begin by looking at the realities of American Protestantism and Jewry at that time.

The first attempts at establishing missions to the Jews took place in the 1810s-1820s, corresponding with the first American wave of systematic missions at home and abroad. The American Jewish community counted at that time merely a few thousand people. Between the 1820s and the 1870s, a quarter of a million Jews came to America, mostly from German speaking Central Europe. From the 1880s to 1923, there was a mass Jewish immigration to America, when as many as three million Jews arrived, mostly from Eastern Europe. Most of them were Yiddish speakers, with very meager means, who worked in sweatshops, or sold merchandise out of pushcarts, living in poor working-class neighborhoods. Such newly arrived immigrants were mostly young, hopeful, hoping to integrate into new social, economic, political, and cultural surroundings.

The people who approached the missions were young migrants and immigrants, eager, hardworking, and ambitious. Leaving their small towns in Eastern Europe for big American cities, they needed to reorganize their spiritual and communal lives. They were seeking a new social, communal, mental, spiritual, and intellectual framework. Many chose secularized or liberalized frameworks within the Jewish fold, but some explored other spiritual options. Christianity, as presented by missionaries, was an option that some young immigrants considered. The mission would not have been there, alongside dozens of others, if it was not for the huge immigration that took place during those years.



This provided a meeting ground for Protestants to relate to Jews, just when their interest in the Jews and their zeal for missionizing that people was on the rise.

WHY THE JEWS?

Why have Protestant-sponsored missions directed so much effort, energy, hope, resources, and personnel toward the evangelization of the Jews? Why were Protestants relating to the Jews with much eagerness and hope? One needs to look at the theology that motivated missions. Jews have often been suspicious or resentful towards the presence of missions in their midst. Contrary to a common perception, however, missions are not composed of antagonists who are trying to destroy the existence of Jewry. Enemies of the Jews do not dedicate their lives to evangelizing them. Those who engage in missions to the Jews are interested in the Jews, their history, their place in God's economy, and the realities of their lives. Missionaries to the Jews held at times ambivalent opinions on the Jews culturally, but they considered them a special people. They saw the Jews as God's first nation, still destined for a glorious future in a restored Davidic kingdom in the Land of Israel - the Holy Land. Leopold Cohn's mission, and almost all the other missions that came about during this period, held to that hope. They did not see the Jews as ordinary people who needed to be Christianized, but as a people with special significance in God's plans for the nations.

The missionaries were not the only ones who held such views. They represented the position of a large Protestant constituency around them, including their sponsors, the groups and individuals who helped support their work. The community, at times with some reservations and residues of old stereotypes, was changing

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its opinion of Jews based on a new reading of the scriptures and the adoption of Messianic hopes. Already Philipp Spener, the late seventeenth century German theologian and founder of a Pietist university in Halle, adopted a biblical Messianic outlook on the role of the Jews in God's plans for human redemption and called upon Christians to treat Jews with kindness. Messianic convictions informed the position of the Institutum Judaicum, which the Pietists established in Halle, as well as a series of Pietist missions, such as the Berlin Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. Missionary hopes and a new reading of biblical prophecies also informed British missions, as well as missions in other countries.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Stuart: We are grateful for your enlightened, positive, and respectful dealing with matters of missionary behavior and things of that sort. Do you have punitive kickback from those in the Jewish world because you have the chutzpa to talk positively about Jews who believe in Jesus?

Dr. Ariel: I did. I had forgotten about the suspicious attitudes that I had received, but you reminded me. I wrote a number of books and articles on missions and Messianic Jews. I received a prize once from the American Society of Church History, but not from any society of Jewish history. Once a writer, who was "combating missions," decided, based on my writings, that I was suspicious, and related to me as "an enemy of the Jewish people." That hurt me a lot. I happen to be a highly committed Jew. Moreover, the writer failed to understand what my work was about and what a historiographical line



I was taking. I believe that we need to treat seriously and respectfully the people and communities that we study, and write in an open-minded and even-handed manner on all groups and faiths that we explore. As a Jew, I do not think that there is an ideal type of ‘Jew’ in the Weberian sense. There are at least a hundred different ways of being Jewish. I consider all people who consider themselves Jewish to be Jewish and I do not discriminate between one Jew or another based on ideology, theology, or political affiliation.

The suspicious attitudes represented a previous generation. I have sensed a change throughout the years. People can still react with hostility, but I think that there is a growing acceptance of Jewish Believers in Jesus. You can see this in newspaper and journal articles, and in academic works, as well as in the attitudes of individuals. The change is not universal; it depends on where people are located in the Jewish community and where they stand on tolerance and inclusivity. But, on the whole, I think that there is growing awareness in some Jewish circles, that there is no one definition of a Jew, and that people can be Jewish in many ways. Attitudes also depend on encountering and interacting with Messianic Jews. In Israel, and in the United States as well, there are growing communities of Messianic people who interact with them and respect them for what they are.

Stuart: Dr. Ariel, we are very grateful for the depth of scholarship that you bring to our conference. Can give us some insight into Leopold Cohen’s standing in his own milieu, that is among his peers and his time?

Dr. Ariel: When I researched missions to the Jews I was amazed at how often missionaries were competitive with one another. They competed for resources, for

approval of the Protestant community, for Jewish immigrants and young people to approach them, and they competed over the quality of and recognition they can get for their writings. In some ways, they competed in the same way that people compete over turfs and resources. In other times, they competed the way academicians do, over students, reputation and publications. Leopold and Joseph Cohn stirred envy and resentment. Leopold and Joseph Cohn were formidable persons but, for the most part, not popular among fellow missionaries. Missionaries and writers have sometimes overlooked their achievements, which were quite impressive: a systematic, well-functioning, growing missionary endeavor, which became a global organization. Success is a tricky reality. Missionaries had enemies in the Jewish community who were on their case, and enemies within the missionary community. The defamations against Leopold Cohn were incredible, but when one reads his writings, this man was theologically educated, and he was charismatic and persuasive enough to convert hundreds of young people. Still, missionaries like Leopold Cohn were under watch; theirs was a risqué business, particularly when the missions were still small endeavors. A Pop and Mom missionary enterprise with some assistance was dangerous, since one person was associated with the mission, and his downfall could mean the ruin of the mission.

Joseph Cohn lamented about the pitfalls, but his book also radiates the excitement of an engaging pioneering enterprise. The dangers might have added to his sense of accomplishment. When JHC wrote his book he called it, "I have fought the good fight." The fight with the Protestant community over respect for Jews and support for missions, and a fight within the



missionary community, where his father and he faced envy, competition and defamations. Antagonists of missions, in the Jewish community, and non-Jewish community as well embraced such negative gossip with gusto. No one, of course, should be immune from criticism, but the idea that the Cohns and their missionary endeavor also deserve respect has dawned on larger missionary community rather belatedly.

Jim: You made a comment about the Pietists that caught my interest and a comment about Nazi Germany. Recently, I started reading this book by Alfred Rosenberg, called *The Track of the Jew through the Ages*, and I was actually astonished by some of the material that was in it. He goes back and besides all the other junk that is in there and the antisemitism and everything else, he actually refers back to works related to German missions to the Jews, and Philosemites in Germany. It was amazing, I had never seen it before. I had wondered if you had done any work on that.

Dr. Ariel: Yes, if you are interested in the story of German Philosemites and Pietists I can make a few recommendations. This topic has only come up in recent years. Studies started hesitantly in the 1960s-1970s; people at that time were in denial of the idea that there were German Philosemites. However, first let us relate to the term 'Philosemitism,' which needs to be defined. It is a complicated term, related to Christians interested in Jews and their wellbeing. Philosemitism has mostly represented Christians interested in Jews on behalf of their Messianic Christian faith. Such Christians, even if not completely devoid of negative cultural stereotypes of Jews, supported Jewish causes, defended Jews

against harassment and defamations. Philosemites often used the venue of mission as a convenient way of connecting with Jews and affecting their lives. Works on German Philosemitism started hesitantly in the 1960s- 1970s. At that time, many were wary of the idea that Germans could be Philosemitic, and that there had been a large Philosemitic movement in Germany. On the Prussian mission to the Jews, there is a book by Christopher Clark, professor at Cambridge University, and one of the most respected historians of Germany and Prussia. I recommend it.

There has been a renewed interest in the positive aspects of German-Jewish relations throughout history, including Christian German interest in Jewish culture, languages, and writing. Aya Eliada, a professor at the Hebrew University, wrote about Christians who took interest in Yiddish, and collected books in that language. The Halle Pietists at the turn of the eighteenth century established a university in Halle, which excelled in the fields of Ancient Near East, Biblical Studies, and Semitic languages. It was the first university to establish academic teaching of Yiddish, just as in the United States the first to teach Yiddish was the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago in the 1920s. Teaching Yiddish in secular universities would come later. Unfortunately, the Philosemites in Germany were not strong enough to counterbalance or serve as a checks and balances to anti-Jewish forces.

Pieter: Thank you Dr. Ariel. Yesterday, Dr. Keren mentioned that Leopold Cohn was successful because he really knew how to connect with the background of the Jewish people coming to America. The way he communicated the Christian message to them. That he made it (the Christian message) easier for them to



swallow than other missionaries did. Is that something you can comment on?

Dr. Ariel: I would agree with that, although I would add that there were two schools of how missionaries should approach the Jews. Some people claimed that it was better if the missionary was NOT Jewish because then the Jews were not as resentful or suspicious. Arno Gaebelein, who established a mission to the Jews in New York's Lower East Side and spoke Yiddish, claimed that very often Jews suspected that he was Jewish and then he would lose credibility. The Jews were more respectful towards a non-Jewish missionary. They did not see such a person as a traitor, who defected to the other camp, and did not question his sincerity, honesty, and motivation. He therefore insisted that non-Jews should be those who approach Jews.

This was one school of missionaries, and another school was that of the Cohns. In contrast to Gaebelein, Joseph Cohn wrote that one needed to be Jewish in order to understand and relate to Jewish people, speak their language, understand how they felt and what they were going through. It is a fact that as missionaries Leopold and Joseph Cohn were very successful on many levels. One of their successes was how he approached young Jews and how young Jews approached him. However, who am I to say that one was more successful than another and take sides in an historical argument, to go back 120 years and say "Hey Gaebelein, you were mistaken, the Cohn did a better job." I respect both groups and I have a particular admiration to Gaebelein, who was a first-rate intellectual, who became a spokesperson in the fundamentalist-modernist debate.

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Zhava: I was just wondering, what sparked your interest in studying Messianic Jewish movements?

Dr. Ariel: This goes back to my early years as a child in Jerusalem. I grew up in pre-1967, divided Jerusalem, on the border between Israel and Jordan. Jerusalem at that time had numerous missionary houses, and a variety of Messianic groups, including one in my neighborhood. I was curious and wanted to make sense of those people, what brought them to Jerusalem, motivated them, whom they represented, and why were they so interested in Israel and the End-Times. They were both representative of an outside world, and, at the same time, they were part of the city and its special atmosphere. That's my standard answer, but I would have to back to that war in 1973 to give you the full answer. I am not sure you want to hear it...

Alan: Well, we want to hear about it if you are willing to tell it.

Dr. Ariel: ...Well . . . I wrote about it, but you would need to translate my work into English. I have a book about that period in my life called "The Road to Damascus: Memoirs of Captivity." It does not necessarily follow St. Paul, but relates to my intellectual and spiritual searches.

I find it amazing that many Jewish historians have ignored this aspect of Jewish life in recent centuries. Missions as well as Jews who have accepted the Jewish faith have been part of the Jewish scene. This includes people, literature and ideas, what I would call the borderline cultures that they created. They created something that was in between Jews and Christians, as well as new facets within Judaism and Christianity. Overlooking this is a terrible mistake.



Zhava: My question is about pre-Reformation Jewish evangelism. Do you know of any efforts besides forced baptism, forced conversions, Jewish-Christian converts turning against their people and against the Talmud, do you know of others?

Dr. Ariel: There were such efforts during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era. There were individuals and groups that devoted their efforts to the evangelization of Jews and even wrote special sermons to that effect. I have never done any work on pre-Reformation or post-Reformation Catholic missions, I have to be outright about that, although I have read about such work, especially in the Late Modern Era.

Alan: I am remembering a testimony by someone named Hermann, does that ring a bell? It was quite a few years ago. It was a Jewish account of a Jewish man named Hermann. (*The person I am referring to is Hermann of Cologne, a Jew who penned an autobiographical account of his conversion in the mid-twelfth century. – editor's note*).

Dr. Ariel: I have not encountered Hermann's testimony, but studying Jewish conversions to Catholicism is important. It is a field of research that should be encouraged.