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Jewish? Christian? Why Not Both? – Leopold Cohn and the Introduction of Messianic Judaism to America

Mendi Keren

ABSTRACT

Ever since the early days of Christianity, it was generally accepted that a person could be either a Jew or a Christian, but not both. This, however, changed in the late nineteenth century. Eisik Leib Yosowitz was a young Orthodox Jew who studied at Hungary's top yeshivas. In the early 1890s he came to America. Shortly thereafter he converted, was ordained as a minister, changed his name to Leopold Cohn, and became a missionary. Unlike traditional missionaries who persuaded Jews to convert to Christianity, he suggested another missionary approach. It evolved in Europe in the early nineteenth century and was later known as Messianic Judaism.

This approach encouraged Jews to retain their former identity, traditions and sacred texts, yet also to adopt Jesus as their messiah and the New Testament as an equally holy addition to the Bible. Cohn claimed that this would not only make them better Jews, but would also win them a higher spiritual status than people who were born Christians. In Europe, Messianic Judaism gained very limited success, yet in America, under Cohn's leadership it became the largest mission to the Jews. Since its establishment on American soil, this movement has gained



millions of supporters, and their number continues to grow. Nowadays, Cohn's Chosen People Ministries celebrates 125 years since its establishment.

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, Gentiles have tried to convert Jews. Sometimes, they have done so through cultural influence and intellectual persuasion, and sometimes by imposing financial sanctions, social restrictions or even threats of deportation and death. In response, the rabbis have stated that converting to another religion is such a grave sin that a Jew is obligated to give up his life rather than commit it. The Jewish people have regarded converts with disgust, treated them as traitors, and excommunicated them and their families.¹

Efforts to convert the Jews intensified following the rise of Christianity. The new religion saw itself as a continuation of true Judaism, and often claimed that the Jews who did not believe in Jesus caused his death.² During the eighteenth century, following the end of the Middle Ages, Christian missionary efforts have intensified. Just as other missions operated among people in Asia, Africa, the Far East and South America, so numerous missions specifically targeted the Jews. Most Jews shunned Christians in general and missionaries in particular. Yet, for a few Jews, the economic and social benefits that came along with conversion to

1 Maimonides, *Mishne Tora: Sefer Mada*, 5, 2.

2 Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein (eds.), *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; Kimberly B. Stratton and Andrea Lieber (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries in Early Judaism and Christianity: Ambiguities, Complexities, and Half-Forgotten Adversaries*, Boston: Brill, 2016.

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Christianity were a temptation they couldn't resist.³

Despite the missionaries' efforts, the number of converts remained low, as did their “quality” and it was clear that most Jewish converts to Christianity were motivated not by a strong inner belief, but by materialistic and social reasons. Seeking to attract a larger variety of Jews, some Protestant missions, especially in England and Scotland, no longer sought to fully convert the Jews, but rather encouraged them to preserve their Jewish identity while at the same time accepting Jesus Christ as their savior and the New Testament as their additional Bible. These converts were known as Christian Jews.⁴ The movement did not gain much success, and it seems that there were no more than a few hundred Christian Jews in all of Europe at this time.⁵

EISIK LEIB YOSOWITZ LIFE IN HUNGARY

Eisik Leib (in Hebrew: Yitzhak Arie) Yosowitz was born in 1862 in the village of Berezna, in Maramaros county in eastern Hungary.⁶ This was a remote region which was sparsely populated, and most of the people who lived there, including the Jews, were poor farmers. The Jews of this region were known for their strong religious beliefs, their Hasidic lifestyle, and their absolute compliance with their rabbis' commands. Like all other

3 *World Atlas of Christian Missions*, New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1911; Daniel Joseph Eyearitt, *Jewish-Christian Missions to Jews, 1820-1935*, Ann Arbor, Michgen: UMI, 1989.

4 William Thomas Gidney, *The History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews: From 1809 to 1908*, London: London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, 1908.

5 Gershon Nerel, *Messianic Jews in Eretz- Israel*, PhD dissertation, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1996, pp. 24-36.

6 Leopold Cohn, *To an Ancient People: The Autobiography of Dr. Leopold Cohn*, New York NY: Chosen People Ministries, 1996, p. 3; Yaacov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, pp. 28-29.



Jewish children, Eisik Leib also grew up in an ultra-Orthodox environment and received a traditional Jewish education. This included acquiring basic Hebrew reading and writing skills, which were used to study some parts of the Old Testament and the basic study of the Talmud. Then, some of the boys were sent to study in a yeshiva – a higher education institution dedicated solely to Talmudic studies.⁷

At the age of seven, Eisik Leib’s father died, and after his Bar Mitzvah his mother sent him to the Hasidic yeshiva in Sighet, the county’s capital. The head of the yeshiva, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Teitelbaum, who was also the chief rabbi of the town, was a Hasidic leader who became known for his zealous outlook. A few years later, Yosowitz decided to continue his studies in Hungary’s most prestigious yeshiva, located in Pressburg, today Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. There, according to his own testimony, he was ordained as a rabbi.⁸ This, however, conflicts with the fact that he did not spend enough time studying in Pressburg, nor was he married, or elected as a rabbi in his village – three necessary conditions for becoming a rabbi.⁹

After returning to his village, Yosowitz married Rosa Hoffman, the daughter of an established Jew from Apshitza, another small village in Maramaros, and the couple moved to live with the bride’s parents. As was customary in those days, if the groom was a Torah scholar, the bride’s father would support the newlyweds so that the groom could continue his studies without needing to provide for his wife. Unfortunately, a year later, the bride’s father died and Yosowitz had to take over the

7 Gross and Cohen, *Sefer Marmarosh*, Tel Aviv: Beit Marmoresh, 1983, pp. 75-76 (Hebrew).

8 Leopold Cohn, *To an Ancient people*, New York NY: Chosen People Ministries, 1996, pp. 4-7; Alexander Bacon, *The Strange Story of Dr. Cohn and Mr. Jozovics* (with apologies to “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”), New York, 1918, pp. 9-10.

9 Bacon, *The Strange Story*, pp. 64-66.

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family business and manage the local inn. Given his more than average Talmudic knowledge, and although he did not hold any official position, the local Jews used to consult him on all religious matters, and he became a sort of unofficial rabbi.

In 1891, Yosowitz and his brother-in-law were accused of forging an ownership document for a piece of land that belonged to one of their clients who had passed away without heirs. Yosowitz immediately fled the country, leaving behind his wife with their four children: Benjamin, Joseph, Joshua and Esther. After a long journey, he arrived in the United State where he met some of his friends and countrymen who were happy to see him. Cohn denied that story and claimed that he decided to emigrate to America at the advice of a rabbi whom he consulted about the messiah.¹⁰

THE FIRST YEAR IN AMERICA

After his arrival in New York in 1892, Yosowitz said he sought the help of Rabbi Hillel Klein, who emigrated to America a year before. Rabbi Klein, who headed Ohab Zedek, the largest Orthodox community of Hungarian Jews in New York, was unable to help Yosowitz to find the rabbinical position he sought.¹¹ Later on, during one of Cohn’s trials, Rabbi Klein denied ever meeting Yosowitz.¹²

Shortly thereafter, Yosowitz met Herman Warszaviak, a Polish Jewish immigrant who had converted and became a successful missionary.¹³ Warszaviak convinced Yosowitz to

10 Cohn, *To an Ancient People*, p. 9-10.

11 Chaim Steinberger, *First Hungarian Congregation Ohab Zedek: founded in 1873*, New York, NY: First Hungarian Congregation Ohab Zedek, 2005); Bacon, *The Strange Story*, pp. 11-14; The Sheperd of Israel, May 1926.

12 Bacon, *The Strange Story*, pp. 58-60.

13 C. G. Douglas, *Hermann Warszaviak: The Little Messianic Prophet, Or*



follow in his footsteps and on June 26, 1892 Yosowitz converted. Following his conversion, Warszaviak helped Yosowitz to obtain a scholarship for a Christian institution in Edinburgh, Scotland. While Yosowitz traveled to Scotland, the news about his conversion reached his family in Hungary, and they excommunicated him. Nevertheless, Yosowitz convinced his wife, who was devastated by his conversion, to join him with their children and eventually they too converted.¹⁴ He excelled in his studies and was ordained a Baptist pastor. After returning to New York in October 1893, Eisik Leib Yosowitz changed his name to Leopold Cohn and claimed he was a former Jewish rabbi.¹⁵ Despite numerous testimonies, including ones made in court by his own family members, Cohn denied ever having a former name.

A few weeks later, Cohn established his own mission in Brownsville and called it *The Chosen People*. In those days, Brownsville was one of the largest concentrations of Jewish immigrants, most of whom suffered from great poverty and were discriminated against.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, a Jew named Adolf Benjamin published the facts about Cohn's dubious past in the local Jewish newspaper.¹⁷ Despite the negative publicity, Cohn acquired the trust of the Brooklyn chapter of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, which provided him with financial support. Since there were many missions at the time who were attempting to appeal to Jews, Cohn had to establish his own strategy.¹⁸

Two Years' Labour Among the Refugee Jews in New York, Edinburgh: A. Elliot, 1894.

¹⁴ Cohn, *To an Ancient People*, p. 10-30; Bacon, pp. 15-17.

¹⁵ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 10, 1887, p. 10.

¹⁶ *The Chosen People*, March 1897, p. 6-7.

¹⁷ *Hebrew Standard*, October 13, 1893, p. 6.

¹⁸ Cohn, *To an Ancient People*, p 30-32; Tompson, *A Century of Jewish Missions*, Chicago, New York, Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1902,

He did this in two ways. Firstly, he adopted and expanded the idea of Messianic Judaism, which he had probably picked up in Europe, and which he preferred to “regular” conversion. Secondly, he divided his time and energy and spent as much time and effort preaching and working among the Christians, whom he convinced to contribute their time and money, as he did among the Jews.¹⁹

In time, Cohn’s missionary station offered medical consultation, supplied used clothes that his Christian supporters donated, and delivered food packages to the poor. It also provided English-language classes and a sewing school. There, unskilled Jewish women were trained so that they could find work in the garment industry’s sweatshops. This was virtually the only place where an uneducated woman who did not speak English could find work.²⁰

Cohn invited Jews to celebrate the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays in a traditional atmosphere. Thanks to his rabbinical knowledge, he delivered sermons that to the unaware ears of the newcomers, sounded like the ones they were used to listening to in the synagogue in their old homeland. Having caught the attention of his audience, he slowly incorporated his messianic messages in his speech. Unlike other missionaries, who persuaded Jews to abandon their Jewish legacy and replace it with a Christian one, he urged his Jewish listeners to embrace belief in Christ as a full realization of their Jewish identity.

Cohn directed much of his time and energy to creating strong links with the Christian community. In late 1895, he began

pp. 246—247; Bacon, *The Strange Story*, p. 17; Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen people*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁹ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen people*, p. 33.

²⁰ *Chosen People*, December 1896, p. 8; *ibid.*, May 1897, p. 7; *ibid.*, March 1899, p. 7; Cohn, *To an Ancient People*, p 32-41.



publishing *The Chosen People* magazine.²¹ He used it to report to his Christian readers about his activities and persuaded them to contribute money and volunteer in his mission. This became such a crucial tool to the mission's ongoing operation that regardless of the various changes of the mission's names and its numerous leaders, this monthly publication still appears today under the same name, more than 120 years after it was first published.

The magazine was intended for a Christians readership that was cautioned against sharing it with Jewish readers.²² *The Chosen People* had a regular structure. It first reported on the mission's ongoing issues, such as large donations, the purchase of property, upcoming events etc. Then, it reported on various incidents which occurred in the mission, the people who visited it, questions asked, confrontation with religious Jews etc. It then presented a report of a converted Jew, sometimes with his picture. The final section described the daily activities, such as those of the sewing school, the medical activity and other voluntary work. The last page was dedicated to listing the names of the people who donated money to the mission and the amount they gave.

In 1896, Cohn published his first book in Yiddish, entitled *What Is His Name and What is His Son's Name*.²³ In the ensuing years he published several other books in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English, including *Messiah Be Cut Off*, and *Behold the Virgin*.²⁴

The Jewish and Christian missionaries who preceded him portrayed Jews as traitors and evildoers and regarded Christians as superior to them. Consequently, they encouraged Jews to abandon their inferior standing and embrace Christianity's

21 Cohn, *To an Ancient People*, p 46-47.

22 For example: *The Chosen People*, January 1902, p. 2.

23 Leopold Cohn, *Mah Shemo U-Mah Shem Beno*, Brooklyn: Louis Zaltzman Press, 1896 (Yiddish).

24 Leopold Cohn, *Messiah Be Cut Off*, Brooklyn NY: Life Line Mission, 1898; Idem., *Behold the Virgin Shall Conceive and Bear a Son*, 1898, Brooklyn NY: unknown publisher, 1898.

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supreme status. By contrast, Cohn regarded the Jews as the chosen people, as reflected in the name he chose for his mission. He implored Jews to retain their Jewish identity, while also acknowledging Christ as the true messiah and the New Testament as a direct continuation of the old one.

To his Christian listeners, he explained that the spiritual virtue of Messianic Jews is higher than that of non-Jewish Christians, since they resembled Jesus, who was also a Jew. He then argued that only a converted Jewish rabbi, like himself, could convince other Jews to adopt Jesus. Cohn was a great orator, and although he managed to convert only a relatively small number of Jews, he was able to persuade many Christians to support his work.²⁵

EXPANDING THE MISSION’S REACH

In 1897, Cohn opened another branch on a main thoroughfare in Williamsburg and named it the Williamsburg Mission to the Jews.²⁶ This neighborhood was home to many formerly Hungarian Orthodox Jews who had moved there from Manhattan’s lower east side. Some 15 years later, by the turn of the twentieth century, the Williamsburg Mission was considered one of the most successful missions operating among Jews in America.²⁷

Over the years, the mission expanded its activities. By the early 1900s it also offered recreational activities for boys and girls, which allowed their mothers to go out to work. It also offered medical services which were provided by doctors and

²⁵ *Chosen People*, April 1896, pp. 3-4; Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, pp. 30-31; Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism*, p. 173.

²⁶ *Chosen People*, February 1897, p. 1; *ibid.*, May 1897, p. 8; Cohn, *To an Ancient People*, pp. 41-43.

²⁷ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 31, 1906, p. 4; *ibid.*, February 10, 1899, p. 11; *ibid.*, February 9, 1900, p. 13; *idem.*, June 23, 1900, p. 13.



nurses who worked in the clinic he established or visited the sick in their homes.²⁸

Due to his success, Cohn had acquired many supporters, but also many enemies. His name became notorious among the Jews, and also among some Christians, who saw him as a charlatan and an exploiter. The Jewish leadership found it difficult to act effectively against Cohn's mission.²⁹ This was because in Christian America – which was partly antisemitic – such activity was considered legitimate and even welcome.

In addition, Jewish society was itself divided. Orthodox Jews felt that the larger Reform and Conservative communities posed a far greater threat to them than the small group of converted Jews. Cohn complained that in several instances his workers faced threats and violent attacks. Yet by and large, the Jewish community's response was confined to the publication of a few books and articles in the local Jewish press and the distribution of warning posters and leaflets.³⁰

Notwithstanding his efforts to convert them, Cohn regarded himself as the protector of Jews. For example, in 1899 he asked the New York City Education Commissioner to remove books like Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* that portrayed Jews in a negative light.³¹ Two years later, he responded to the accusation that the Jews refrained from waving flags to mark the death of President Theodore Roosevelt. He explained that the president had died during Rosh Ha-Shana, the Jewish new year, so that all the Jews had been in the

28 *Chosen People*, January 1898, p. 7; *ibid.*, March 1899, p. 7; *ibid.*, January 1901, p. 4.

29 *Morgen Journal*, October 23, 1910, p. 4; *ibid.*, August 31, 1916, p. 4; *Chosen People*, November 1900, p. 1.

30 Jonathan D. Sarna, "The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions," *The Journal of American History*, 68, 1 (1981), pp. 35-51; *Chosen People*, January 1898, pp. 3-4; *ibid.*, January 1899, p. 4-5.

31 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 7, 1899, p. 14.

synagogues and were unaware of what happened.³²

With the rise of antisemitism in the early twentieth century, Cohn delivered countless sermons to the Christian public reminding them that Christians have a historical debt toward their “older brothers.” He pleaded them to be more tolerant and not to offend, insult or discriminate against poor Jewish immigrants.³³ Like many other evangelicals, Cohn regarded Zionism, and the return of the Jews to the land of Israel, as a fulfillment of the Messianic redemption prophecy. To help the Zionist movement, Cohn raised funds among Christians and encouraged them to purchase products that were produced in the holy land.³⁴

In the early twentieth century some of Cohn’s wife’s family members emigrated to the United States. Since they had never forgiven him for converting, they told everybody that Cohn’s real name was Yosowitz and that he was never ordained a rabbi. As this came to court, Cohn could no longer hide some of the facts about his life and his lawyer admitted he was not really a rabbi.³⁵ The witnesses also told the court his real name and Cohn needed to tell his side of the story.³⁶

In 1906, Cohn used some of the money he collected to purchase a large farm and country house in Connecticut.³⁷ A few years later, he was faced the accusation that instead of being used for his community, the farm served only Cohn’s family.³⁸

32 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 24, 1901, p. 16; *Chosen People*, October 1901, p. 2

33 *Chosen People*, October 1902, p. 3; *ibid.*, November 1902, p. 1; *ibid.*, February 1904, p. 4; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 19, 1902, p. 12; *ibid.*, February 21, 1902, p. 6; *ibid.*, May 5, 1902, p. 12; *ibid.*, May 7, 1902, p. 3; December 24, 1906, p. 11; *ibid.*, February 18, 1907, p. 21; *ibid.*, December 9, 1907, p. 10.

34 *Chosen People*, December 1915, p. 1.

35 Bacon, *The Strange Story*, pp. 21-40.

36 *Chosen People*, December 1899, p. 4; *ibid.*, January 1902, p. 3; Bacon, *The Strange Story*, 40-50.

37 *Chosen People*, November 1906, p. 6; *ibid.*, December 1906, p. 1; *ibid.*, November 1907, p. 7.

38 Bacon, *The Strange Story*, p. 60.



THE RISE AND DOWNFALL

In 1907, Cohn received a series of very substantial donations from a wealthy woman named Francis Huntley totaling about 100,000 USD.³⁹ Cohn refused to share this donation with the Baptist church which had previously supported him. The church leaders then accused him of violating his agreement with them and removed their sponsorship from Cohn's mission. Regardless, the donation was big enough, and Cohn's reputation was solid enough, to allow him to continue his operation and to raise funds independently.⁴⁰

Cohn used the money to buy a plot in the heart of Williamsburg on which he built his own building, which was completed a few years later. The building, named The House of the Prince of Peace, served as the mission's headquarters and activity center. In addition, he also set up another missionary station in Coney Island, where many Jews spent their summer vacation.⁴¹

Of all of Leopold's children, Joseph was the only one to follow in his father's footsteps and to seek a career as a Christian clergyman.⁴² In 1908 Joseph was ordained a pastor and began to participate in the mission's activities which, as a result, became a family business. Unlike his father, who spoke with a heavy accent, Joseph's English, which he acquired from an early age in the United States, was totally native. This assisted him as he traveled to many Christian communities across the country.⁴³

39 Bacon, *The Strange Story*, pp. 72-75.

40 Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 30.

41 *Chosen People*, February 1908, p. 6-7; *ibid.*, December 1908, p. 7; *ibid.*, October 1909, pp. 3-4.

42 *Chosen People*, February 1902, p. 8; *ibid.*, March 1906, p. 1.

43 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 7, 1909, p. 14; *ibid.*, September 29, 1911, p. 3; Joseph Hoffman Cohn, *I Have Fought a Good Fight: The Story of Jewish Mission Pioneering in America*, New York NY: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1953.

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On these trips, Joseph delivered countless sermons in which he told his Christian listeners about his father’s missionary activities and asked for their donations and support. Like his father, Joseph also became a protector of the Jews and spoke out against the slandering of the Jews and discriminating against them. He likewise described the many ways in which Jews contributed to the world in general, and to America in particular.⁴⁴

In 1908, Leopold confronted Philip Spivak and David Shapiro, two converted Jews who also ran a mission in Brooklyn. The two, who wished to undermine his credibility, visited the country house he had just purchased in Connecticut. Leopold had claimed that the farm was part of his missionary institutions, and the two sought to demonstrate that it was used only by the family. Upon their arrival, they confronted Joshua, Cohn’s third son, who pulled a gun at them. The controversy between the three converted Jews drew the attention of the local newspapers. In the ensuing years, the press reported extensively on the mutual defamation war which was carried out both on the streets and in the courts.⁴⁵

Cohn’s negative image intensified following his wife’s death in 1908.⁴⁶ Soon after, he married Edith, who was 32 years younger, explaining that his sole reason for doing so was her willingness to raise his little son David. In addition, by that time it became common knowledge that Cohn had become rich and personally owned some of the mission’s properties.⁴⁷

Hoping to salvage his tarnished public image Cohn published

44 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 2, 1912, p. 10; *Pokeepsie Evening Enterprise*, May 52, 1914, p. 6; *Bolivar Breese*, September 17, 1914, p. 1.

45 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 5, 1908, p. 6; *ibid.*, August 21, 1901, p. 7; *ibid.*, January 3, 1909, p. 2; *ibid.*, October 8, 1913, p. 1; *ibid.*, December 15, 1913, p. 11; Bacon, *The Strange Story*, pp. 18-20.

46 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 6, 1908, p. 22; Cohn, *To an Ancient People*, pp. 47-50.

47 Bacon, *The Strange Story*, pp. 69-72.



his autobiography titled *The Story of a Modern Missionary to an Ancient People - The Autobiography of Leopold Cohn, a Missionary Among the Two Million Jews of Greater New York*.⁴⁸

In subsequent editions, he retracted this grand figure and claimed he was just preaching to the 250,000 Jews of Brooklyn.

In 1913, Cohn was entangled in another legal affair, this time with Alexander Neuowich, a Hungarian Jew who came to the United States in 1902. Shortly thereafter he became Cohn's protégé and in 1906 became a missionary in Pittsburgh. A few years later, Neuowich was involved in some controversial businesses and had to leave his office. He returned to New York, where he was assisted by Cohn.

A few years later, several women claimed that following his wife's death Cohn promised to marry them, but eventually failed to keep his word. Neuowich, who heard their stories, went to Cohn and demanded him to compensate them for breaching the marriage promise and threatened to sue him. Cohn turned to the police and reported on a conspiracy against him and as result, Neuowich was arrested.

In May 1913, Neuowich filed a suit against Cohn for wrongful imprisonment, claiming that Cohn's false accusation caused him to suffer loss of employment and other expenses. At the trial, which sought to undermine Cohn's credibility, Alexander Bacon, Neuowich's lawyer, brought several witnesses who testified that Cohn's real last name was indeed Yosowitz and that he had never been ordained as a rabbi, but was a simple innkeeper. They also exposed his involvement in the forging of the deed documents and his escape from Hungary before trial.

⁴⁸ Leopold Cohn, *The Story of a Modern Missionary to an Ancient People: Being the Autobiography of Ex-Rabbi Leopold Cohn, Missionary to the Jews and Founder of the American Board of Missions to the Jews*, New York : American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1908; Idem., *The Story of a Modern Missionary to an Ancient People: Being the Autobiography of Leopold Cohn, Missionary to the 250,000 Jews of Brooklyn*, Brooklyn NY: Chosen People, 1908.

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In 1915, Samuel Freuder published an autobiographical book titled *A Missionary's Return to Judaism*.⁴⁹ Freuder was also a former Hungarian Orthodox Jew who studied in Pressburg yeshiva. After his arrival in America, he was ordained a rabbi by the Reform Judaism's rabbinical seminary – the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati. In 1891, he was baptized by the Chicago Hebrew Mission and became a missionary himself. A couple of years later, he repented and returned to Judaism. In his book, he dedicated a whole chapter to Leopold Cohn in which he tells about his false identity, the fact that he was not a rabbi and the various affairs in which he was involved.⁵⁰

These revelations drove the church to set up its own special investigation committee which published its report in 1916. The committee acquitted Cohn of all guilt and encouraged Christians to continue to contribute to his missionary activities.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the court hearing continued till 1917 and although Cohn was acquitted, his reputation was badly damaged.⁵² A year later Philip Spivak sued Cohn for slandering him during the trial. Although the judge ruled in favor of Spivak, he only awarded him one dollar as compensation.⁵³

In 1918, Alexander Bacon, a former Colonel who was Neuowich's lawyer, published a book titled *The Strange Case of Doctor Cohn and Mister Yosovitz*, and added in a sarcastic manner: *with an apology to Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*. The book, which was based on the formal court hearings and

49 Samuel Freuder, *A Missionary's Return to Judaism: The Truth about the Christian Missions to the Jews*, New York: The Sinai Publishing Company, 1915.

50 Freuder, *A Missionary's Return to Judaism*, pp. 164-177.

51 D. L. Pierson (ed.), *The Missionary Review of the World*, 39 (1916), p. 873; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 15, 1916, p. 2; *ibid.*, June 16, 1916, p. 4; *ibid.*, September 22, 1916, p. 20; Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, pp. 33-34.

52 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 19, 1917, p. 1; *ibid.*, February 21, 1917, p. 3; *ibid.*, February 22, 1917, p. 14; *ibid.*, February 24, 1917, p. 15.

53 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 7, 1918, p. 2; *ibid.*, May 13, 1918, p. 1.



protocols, reviewed the facts that had been revealed in recent years and accused Cohn of hiding the truth from his followers and acting in a dishonest manner. This was too much for Cohn, and in 1920 he resigned his role as head of the mission and was succeeded by his son Joseph.

AWAY FROM THE PUBLIC EYE

Groomed by his father for over ten years and having the advantage of being raised in the United States and understanding American mentality gave Joseph a great advantage in running the business. The father and son divided the work between them. Leopold, who had the advantage of speaking Yiddish and having an extraordinary knowledge of the Jewish texts, was now in charge of all “Jewish issues.” Joseph, on the other hand expanded the mission’s reach into other Christian communities and in 1924 he renamed it American Board of Missions to the Jews.

In 1920, Leopold began to write, edit and publish another monthly journal titled *Shepherd of Israel*. Unlike *The Chosen People*, which was aimed to the mission’s Christian supporters, the *Shepherd of Israel*, which was written in both Yiddish and in English, targeted the Jews. The journal attracted their attention by publishing articles on various Jewish related issues such as the Balfour Declaration, which promised the Jews to establish a “national home” in Palestine; the appointment of a Jew, Lord Herbert Samuel, as the first British governor of Palestine; and even the international assembly of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish movement in Vienna in 1923.⁵⁴

It also dealt with local issues which were of interest to the

⁵⁴ The Sheperd of Israel, December 1921; *ibid.*, November 1922; *ibid.*, November 1923.

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Jews such as the “suicide epidemic,” the 1920s emigration laws, which limited the number of newcomers, and the activities of the Ku Klux Klan.⁵⁵ In the 1930s, Cohn dedicated more articles to questions regarding Zionism and to Britain’s new White Book, which curbed some of the rights the Jews had enjoyed so far in Palestine.⁵⁶ Each of the issues presented a certain “great Jew” who converted to Christianity, and several issues dealt with what it perceived as persecution of Christian Jews by Jewish leaders and by the Jewish press.⁵⁷

Leopold also published several new booklets titled: *To the Two Houses of Israel* (meaning the Orthodox and Reform); *Cain and Abel – Israel and Christ*; *Jewish Holidays and their Meaning*; *Do Christians Believe in Three Gods?*; and *A Debate Between a Jew and a Christian*. He also issued new edition of some he had published in the past.⁵⁸ By that time, the mission offered about ten publications for Jews and another ten, including one titled *How to destroy the Jews, for Christians*.⁵⁹

55 *The Sheperd of Israel*, April 1922; *ibid.*, October 1922; *ibid.*, December 1923.

56 *The Sheperd of Israel*, July-August 1930; *ibid.*, September 1930; *ibid.*, December 1930; *ibid.*, January 1931.

57 *The Sheperd of Israel*, May 1923; *ibid.*, July 1923; *ibid.*, June 1926; *ibid.*, November 1926.

58 Leopold Cohn, *To Both the Houses of Israel: Orthodox and Reformed Judaism*, Brooklyn NY: Beth Sar Shalom, 1911; *Idem.*, *Cain and Abel Israel and Messiah why art thou wroth?*, Brooklyn NY : Contributed for distribution by the Life Line Mission, 1911; *Idem.*, *Yidishe Yamim Tovim Un Zeyer Bedeytung*, Brooklyn: Williamsburg Mission to the Jews, 192? (Yiddish); *idem.*, *The Meaning of the Jewish Holy Days: Jewish Feasts and Fasts, Their Symbolism in Type and Fulfillment*, New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, Inc., 192?; *Idem.*, *Messiah Shall be Cut Off*, New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, Inc., 192?; *Idem.*, *Behold the Virgin*, New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, Inc., 192?; *Idem.*, *A Dialogue Between a Jew and a Christian*, Brooklyn NY: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 193?; *Idem.*, *Cain and Abel, or, Israel and the Messiah*, Brooklyn NY: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 193?; *Idem.*, *The Trinity in the Old Testament or, Do Christians Worship Three Gods?*, Brooklyn NY: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 193?; *Idem.*, *Fun Vemen Redt Yeshaya 53?*, Brooklyn NY: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 193?.

59 *The Chosen People*, April 1930, p. 2; H. O. Van Gilder, *How to Destroythe*



In 1930, as an expression of appreciation for his lifelong missionary work, Leopold Cohn was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Evangelical Wheaton College of Illinois.⁶⁰ That same year, Cohn publicly attacked the fundamentalist pastor William Bell Riley for his antisemitic talks about a global Jewish conspiracy. In 1931, after three years in hospital, David, Leopold's youngest son, died.⁶¹

Joseph expanded the mission's outreach and by 1932 he opened branches in Philadelphia, Atlantic City and Pittsburgh, as well as a branch in Lithuania.⁶² By 1934, it also opened branches in Jerusalem, Palestine, as well as in Ukraine and Poland.⁶³ Leopold Cohn died at the end of 1937 at the age of 75.⁶⁴ The mission which he founded greatly expanded under the management of his son, Joseph, and by 1945 had several branches in the United States, as well as in Poland, Germany, Australia, France, Latvia and Jerusalem.⁶⁵ Joseph continued to develop the organization until his death in 1953, establishing additional branches both in America and abroad.

After seventy years under the leadership of the Cohn family, the mission's management was taken up by others. These included Harry Pretlove, Daniel Fuchs, Harold Sevener, Sam Nadler and the current president, Dr. Mitch Glaser. Today, 125 years after it was founded, Chosen People Ministries operates in

Jews: Sermon Preached by H. O. Van Gilder, Pastor of Central Baptist Church, Columbus, Ohio, to his Own Congregation on July, 27th, 1924, Brooklyn, NY: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1930.

60 Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, pp. 33-34; Wheaton College: Honorary Degrees (<http://a2z.my.wheaton.edu/honorary-degrees>), retrieved April 1, 2020.

61 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 11, 1931, p. 3; *ibid.*, November 12, 1931, p. 19; *ibid.*, November 13, 1931, p. 21.

62 *The Sheperd of Israel*, March 1932; *The Chosen people*, December 1932, p. 11.

63 *The Chosen People*, February 1934, p. 2; *ibid.*, March 1935, p. 2.

64 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 20, 1937, p. 20.

65 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 27, 1945, p. 5; *ibid.*, October 28, 1945, p. 30.

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many countries and caters to hundreds of thousands of people, including many Jews. Cohn’s great success, as well as other social trends in the United States, led to the spreading of the idea of Messianic Judaism.⁶⁶

One of the most popular messianic movements, Jews for Jesus, was established by Moishe Rosen. He worked for the American Board of Missions to the Jews, formerly the Chosen People mission, for 17 years, where he studied the principles of Messianic Judaism. In 1970, he resigned and open his own mission which was first called Hineni (Hebrew: here I am), and then Jews for Jesus.⁶⁷ Today, there are many dozens of messianic movements which have millions of supporters all over the world, including many Jews.

LEOPOLD COHN
FROM A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

Disregarding Cohn’s missionary goals, one can argue that his activities in favor of the Jewish immigrants did not fall short of those of other Jewish leaders. Through his missionary work, he helped the poor Jewish immigrants to integrate into American society by teaching them English, and by giving them professional training that allowed them to support themselves and their families. Cohn also provided them with social and medical services that they could not otherwise receive.

Paradoxically, Cohn also helped preserve the Jewish identity of many of the young immigrants who, like himself, came to America without their families. Living alone, they had no place

66 Michelle Mart, “The ‘Christianization’ of Israel and Jews in 1950s America,” *Religion and American Culture*, 14, 1 (2004), pp. 109-147.

67 Ruth Rosen, *Called to Controversy: The Unlikely Story of Moishe Rosen and the Founding of Jews for Jesus*, Nashville TS: Thomas Nelson, 2012.



to celebrate the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays. But when they visited his mission, they were treated like a family, and were reminded of the traditional foods, prayers, melodies and religious rituals such as fasting and praying on Yom Kippur, eating matzah on Passover and lighting the Hanukkah candles.

Cohn also enjoyed a unique position that allowed him to influence a large Christian public. He often reminded his Christian listeners that they should respect the Jews, the Christian's "big brothers," and to support them until they discover the truth and embrace Christ. He strongly opposed antisemitic manifestations in the American public and openly supported Zionism. In curbing antisemitic sentiments, especially in places like New York which were packed with Jews, Cohn contributed toward making America a much more tolerant place to newcomers. This eventually led to making America a safe haven for Jewish citizens during the Holocaust period.

COHN THE FOUNDER OF CONTEMPORARY MESSIANIC JUDAISM

Despite his numerous shortcomings, Cohn was a visionary and a man of outstanding capabilities. Like so many Jewish immigrants, he too used whatever advantage he had to help himself fulfill the American Dream. He was smart enough not to replicate the missionary approach all the other former Jews and Christians used, and to come up with a new approach which was hitherto unknown in America – Messianic Judaism.

This gained him a unique status, especially among the Christians who were convinced that Cohn's unique approach, along with the fact that he was a former rabbi, would achieve better results when compared with a more traditional missionary

approach. Indeed, various sources indicate that Cohn’s ability to attract donations was far greater compared to other missions to the Jews. Although in 1902 Cohn’s mission was still trailing behind, a report from 1911 reveals that its annual income of more than 25,000 USD was far greater than all of the other missions to the Jews. In fact, the second largest mission, the more established and reputed Chicago Hebrew Mission, had less than half of that income, while most other missions settled for a few thousands or even less.⁶⁸

Cohn’s extraordinary financial and managerial talents need no further proof beside the fact that the organization which he founded in the nineteenth century still continues to operate successfully in the twenty-first. Regardless, one need to look at the mission’s actual achievements. Clearly, the mission’s main purpose was not survival or economic success, but to convert Jews. In that sense Cohn’s achievements were quite miserable.

While being very explicit about the ongoing activities of the mission, the names of his donors and the sums they contributed, Cohn was very obscure about the names and numbers of the Jews he managed to convert. In 1905, eleven years after the mission was founded, Cohn reported that throughout this period it only managed to convert 72 Jews. Based on the figures published in *The Chosen People*, by 1915 – about twenty years after the mission’s establishment – the total number of the converts was estimated at less than 200.⁶⁹ A survey of the magazine in later years indicates that the annual number of reported converts was between 10-20. It seems that until Leopold Cohn’s death in 1937, his mission succeeded to convert a very modest figure of perhaps 500 Jews. Given the fact that during this 40-year period,

68 Tompson, *A Century of Jewish Missions*, pp. 277-278; World Atlas of Christian Missions, pp. 74-75.

69 *The Chosen People*, May 1905, p. 8; Freuder, *A Missionary’s Return to Judaism*, p. 173.



over a million of Brooklyn's Jews were targeted, this is a very modest outcome. This also explains why, despite his numerous attempts, Cohn failed to establish a congregation of messianic Jews.⁷⁰

This, however, does not diminish from his real achievement, which was making Messianic Judaism the mainstream concept of American missions to the Jews. This carried a great meaning not to the Jews, who regarded all Jesus believers as heretics and traitors in any case, but to Christians. Through Messianic Judaism, Christians were taught that as much as they wanted Jews to convert and to accept Jesus, they must also respect them, not discriminate against them and to support their national identity – Zionism. Christians were advised to forget the old-time antisemitic hatred which was not going to force any Jew to convert, especially in America, where freedom of religion was a paramount principle. Instead, they were encouraged to respect and show mercy to the Jewish immigrants, for this act of love was the only way to show them the virtues of Christianity.

A NOTE ON COHN'S INVENTED BIOGRAPHY

According to the many testimonies that were presented during his trials, there is little doubt that Leopold Cohn was in fact Eisik Leib Yosowitz; that he was not ordained as a rabbi; and that he was involved with a fraud scam which made him flee the country without his family. Cohn's story, that he began to ask questions about the messiah in Hungary and was advised by a rabbi to go to America does not make much sense. If indeed this was the case, Cohn had many options to discover Jesus in his own area.

70 Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 33.

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He could have approached one of the local churches, or even one of the few Jewish families who converted, and everybody knew who they were.

In a recently unpublished article titled “A Report on the Charges Against the Founder of Chosen People Ministries, Rabbi Leopold Cohn,” Brian Crawford, a member of Chosen People Ministries, set out to confront all the allegations voiced against Cohn. Relying on numerous sources, Crawford claims that all these allegations are false, and that Cohn was framed by his opponents. Regardless of these conclusions, there can be very good explanations for Cohn’s behavior even if the so-called allegations are true.

A. As for changing his name, this was a very common practice among all sorts of immigrants who, seeking to integrate into a new society, preferred a more familiar and recognizable name. Therefore, it is not clear what Cohn had to gain from hiding what was impossible to conceal, especially after he provided so many details about his life in Hungary.

B. Hiding the criminal accusation made against him was not a smart step on his behalf, as this too was bound to be known sometime. He could have argued either that he was innocent or was framed by someone else, or that indeed in his former life he was tempted into unlawful actions, but in his new life as a Christian he was saved from this tendency.

C. Cohn understood that his only advantage over other missionaries, and especially former Jews, was his rabbinical education and the fact that he had a more



extensive Jewish training. Since he was not giving Jews religious rulings, and since he realized the Christians would not understand the subtle differences between extensive yeshiva training and rabbinical ordination, he simply referred to himself as a rabbi. This did not make any difference to his Jewish listeners who regarded him as a convert anyway.⁷¹

The fact that Cohn was not candid about his past might have been helpful in his early days, but eventually led to his downfall in his later years, especially after the publication of Bacon's book.

CONCLUSION

Leopold Cohn is one of a small number of Jews who, despite living very traditional and unambitious lives in Europe, not only found a new calling in America, but also became exceptionally successful. Because of his unique position, halfway between a Jew and a Christian, Cohn did not receive proper recognition by either side. Christians, perhaps rightly so, were unhappy with the fact that he used his office to obtain a great fortune for himself and to his family, and with his extensive legal affairs. Jews never looked favorably at anyone trying to convert them, let alone someone who claimed to be a former rabbi.

It seems that both Jews and Christians failed to see how greatly Cohn contributed to their interests. For Jews, the benefits from Cohn's activity came rather early. He greatly assisted the newcomer immigrants and helped them in many ways. But his real contribution to the Jews was his work among

⁷¹ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 29.

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the Christians. In his countless sermons before them he repeated the same messages, that Jews were their older brothers, that they should be treated fairly, and that showing them kindness was the only Christian way to help them see the true light of Jesus. This greatly reduced the level of antisemitism and eventually contributed to Jews becoming the most successful minority in America in the twentieth century.

From a Christian perspective, by practically inventing Messianic Judaism in America, Cohn gave the missions to the Jews a new and very sophisticated approach by which they could attract Jews. This, perhaps, was not felt so much in Cohn’s lifetime, when most Jews were poor and underprivileged, as it was in the second half of the twentieth century when Jews, especially in the big cities, belonged to the socio-economic elite. Then, Jews who no longer felt obligated to the Jewish religion on one hand but did not want to become Christians on the other hand, were offered a magical solution. This basically is what made Jews for Jesus such a popular movement in the last third of the century.

Reviewing history, we can say that Leopold Cohn and his son Joseph were among the first to openly express their commitment to the Jewish people and to the Zionist idea. They have spread those views among millions of Christian listeners, including thousands of clergymen. The Christian people who listened to them suddenly realized that instead of the centuries-old hate tradition, which was the only tradition they knew, they should love the Jews and support them.

We can therefore conclude that Leopold Cohn and his son were among the first to make the love to Jews, the love to Zionism, and later, of the State of Israel, one of the top values of evangelical Christianity. In their time, such pro-Jewish and pro-Zionist sentiments were quite rare among Christians. Nowadays,



however, thanks to the Leopold and Joseph, and other Christian leaders, tens of millions of American Christians firmly support Israel in a manner which was unthinkable in their time.⁷²

⁷² Stephen Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009; Yaakov Ariel, *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews*, New York: New York University Press, 2013; Samuel Goldman, *God's Country: Christian Zionism in America*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.