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DOI: 10.15290/mhi.2019.18.02.01

Jewish Conversion to Protestantism in the Ottoman Empire in the Communities of Istanbul and Izmir Until 1856

Abstract

This article is devoted to a comprehensive discussion of Jews' conversion to Protestantism in the Ottoman Empire in the cities of Istanbul and Izmir, during the decade before the *Hatt-i-Şerif of Gülhane*, the first *Tanzimat* decree in 1839, until the *Hatti hümayun* decree of 18 February 1856. It also considers the attitudes of the Ottoman authorities and the Jewish communities toward this phenomenon, as well as the extent to which three missionary societies, the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, the American Board of the Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), and the Free church of Scotland mission, succeeded in prevailing upon Jews to give up their faith. The missionaries worked with the millenarian anticipations and looked forward to intensive activity which would result in the conversion of the Jewish masses. To achieve their objectives they relied on evangelical, educational and philanthropic activities, and on medical missions. The article discusses the motives and the social and economic status of converts to Christianity and those given Christian religious instruction, and describes the communities' steps taken against Jewish conversion to Christianity in the 1820-50s. The article concludes that all three missionary societies that operated in the Ottoman Empire acknowledged the fact of their failure to achieve the goal of converting the Jewish masses, and took solace in those dozens who were converted through their efforts.

Key words: Jews, conversion, Protestantism, Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, Izmir

I. Introduction

This article is devoted to a comprehensive discussion of Jews' conversion to Protestantism in the Ottoman Empire in the cities of Istanbul and Izmir, during the decade before the *Hatt-i-Şerif of Gülhane*, the first *Tanzimat* decree in 1839, until the *Hatti hümayun* decree of 18 February 1856, which promised equal rights to all citizens of the Ottoman Empire of different millets.[1] We will also consider the attitudes of the Ottoman authorities and the Jewish communities toward this phenomenon, as well as the extent to which missionary societies succeeded in prevailing upon Jews to give up their faith. It should be noted that no documented statement has reached us of Jews in the Ottoman Empire voicing their own experience of religious conversion in the first person.

The missionaries of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews mission (hereafter: The London mission), the American mission headed by the American Board of the Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) (henceforth: the American mission), and the Free church of Scotland mission (hereafter: The Scottish mission) worked with the millenarian anticipations then widespread in England and the U.S. They looked forward to intensive activity which would result in the conversion of the Jewish masses. To achieve its objectives, the Protestant mission relied, on evangelical, educational and philanthropic activities, and on medical missions. They were similarly active among minority Christian groups, as well as among Moslems.[2] Missionaries active in the Ottoman Empire drew support and encouragement from the widespread conversion of Jews to Catholicism and Protestantism in Western Europe throughout the nineteenth century. According to the statistics in

1 See Rozen, *The Last Ottoman Century*, i, 53-130.

2 For example see Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East*; Daniel, *American Philanthropy*; Tibawi**,** *British interests in Palestine*; Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*; Sims, *Congregationalist and Anglican Missionaries*. About the three mission societies' history and activity see a partial list of researches: Gidney, *The History*; Kovacs, *The History*; Stanislawski, 'Jewish Apostasy in Russia'; Sarna, 'The Impact of Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions on American Jews'; Bornstein-Makovetsky, 'The Activity of the American Mission'; Jagodzińska, 'Reformers, Missionaries, and Converts'; Clark, *The Politics of Conversion;* Darby, *The Emergence of the Hebrew Christian Movement;* Harel, *Syrian Jewry,* 186-93; id., *Intrigues and Revolution*, 79, 148, 177, 184, 276; Harel, 'Fighting Conversion to Christianity'; Spector Simon, 'The Case of the Curse'; Kark, ''Missions and Architecture'; Perry, *British Mission to the Jews***;** Bartur, 'Discovery of America'; Sapir, 'Sources on the Anglican Missionary Societies'; Yitzhaki-Harel, 'The Scottish Mission in Safed'; Yaffe, *American Protestant mission and its Activities*; id., 'The Activity of the Protestant-American Mission'; Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, 4 vols; Lang, 'The Struggle against Missionary Activity'; Bar-Yosef, 'Christian Zionism and Victorian Culture'; Marten, *Attempting to Bring the Gospel Home*; Marten (with Tamcke), *Christian Witness;* Anderson, *History of the Missions of the ABCFM*.

De La Roi's book, in the course of the nineteenth century, 204,500 Jews became Christian converts of Europe.[3]

The negligible number of Jews who converted to Christianity in the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian, and the Protestant Church in the Ottoman Empire in the 1800s is striking. In most instances the converts to Christianity are referred to by the rabbis as "heretics" (in Hebrew*: minim*) and "apostates" (in Hebrew*: meshummadim*), as well as "those converted to strange worship" [idolatry].[4] The missionary, in many cases himself a baptized Jew, is then usually referred to by the Jews as a "heretic" or "the Great Heretic".[5]

The data and most of the information cited in the article are drawn largely from annual reports and writing submitted by the missionaries, missionary journals, biographies, autobiographies, travel books, diplomatic correspondence and memoirs, and from Jewish sources, especially Responsa literature.

II. Ottoman authorities' opposition to conversion to Protestant Christianity

We learn that the Ottoman authorities were vehemently opposed to missionary activism among Moslems; baptizing Moslems was formally prohibited. But the last official execution to take place in the Ottoman Empire of a convert to Islam who had later recanted and reneged on his conversion occurred on 23 August 1843. In November 1850 a *firman* (a sultanic order) made infringing on the welfare of Protestant converts illegal.[6] The Sublime Porte decreed in 1857 that such converts were to be expelled from the country, and this was in fact done from that time on. This situation made it possible for Jews in Istanbul and Izmir to undergo baptism in the Protestant Church. The authorization granted in 1847 to the Empire's Protestants to form an independent millet formed a more positive attitude on the part of the Sublime Porte toward its Protestant subjects.[7]

3 De La Roi, *Geschichte der Evangelischen Jugend Missions,* 164. We learn about 85,000 Jews in Russia that were converted during the century to Christianity. Schainker, *Confessions of the Shtetl*; Stanislawski, 'Jewish Apostasy in Russia', 190.

4 R. Palagi, *Ginzei hayim*, no. 3 §§ 2 and 106.

5 For example: R. Palagi, *ḥayim beyad*, 'Yore de'ah', no. 35. Most of missionaries of the London Society were European Jews who converted to Christianity.

6 Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*, 69-74; Ozdemir**,** 'Political Use of Conversion'. About a Jew from Libya who converted to Islam and was allowed by the Ottoman authorities to return to Judaism see *Occident* (1 Mar. 1846), 51. In 1838 and 1839, the local cadi reported the conversion of two Jews to Islam*;* Karmi, *The Jewish Community of Istanbul*, 19.

7 Ozdemir, 'Political Use of Conversion'. Similarly the Jews hid the few cases of conversion to Judaism. In 1828 Joseph Wolf tells about a Catholic man who converted to Judaism in Istanbul several years before and adopted the name Joshua. Wolf, *Journal*, iii, 292. In 1854 a Greek priest converted to Judaism, and there were more cases of Greeks who adopted Judaism. The Jews feared that the matter would become public. *Jewish Intelligence* (Jan. 1855), 23-4.

III. Requiring Baptized Jews to Convert to Islam

The law of Islam requiring a non-Moslem subject who had become a Christian to convert to Islam was not typically used against Jews, since the instances of their conversion could be concealed with relative ease. But we learn that baptized Jews were warned the concern was quite real that the law might be resorted to in practice.[8] Rabbi Aharon Krispin of Izmir (died in the mid-1800s) wrote also that "in practice this is not done, so that the non-Jews may not hear that the convert has returned to Judaism, for should this become known to them, the returnee will be put to death".[9] It would appear that most "careerist converts" in the Ottoman Empire among the Jews preferred conversion to Islam rather than Christianity.[10]

IV. The Motives and the Social and Economic Status of Converts to Christianity and Those Given Christian Religious Instruction

Unlike conversion to Islam, baptism afforded a Jew no social or economic advantages as long as he stayed on Ottoman territory, a circumstance that the missionaries were aware of. Missionary reports about Protestant converts' motives often convey the personal impressions of the writers, including even their heartfelt desires. The missionaries typically provided serial lists of all "Inquirers" - those who came in contact with them and who were interested in learning about the principles of Christianity, as well as all those to whom they gave religious instruction.[11]

The missionaries from the early days of their work suspected many of the converts of "careerist" motives. Thus, for instance, Josiah Brewer, the first American missionary in Izmir, writes in 1827 about Leon Atias, his Jerusalem-born Ladino teacher, who expressed eagerness to become a Christian if this would then enable him go to England or America. Brewer noted that he saw no need to encourage this group of candidates for conversion.[12]

Many converts were immigrants and refugees, primarily Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern and Central Europe; many of these people were solitary, unaccompanied individuals.[13] A large number returned to their countries of origin or went elsewhere; presumably, most of them went on living as Jews,

8 Ozdemir, 'Political Use of Conversion'.

9 R. Krispin, *Beit aharon*, ‚Yore de'ah', 48*d*.

10 Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*, 156-96; Bornstein-Makovetsky, 'Jewish Converts to Islam and to Christianity'.

11 Such information is found in dozens of reports written by the missionaries.

12 Brewer, *A Residence*, 321. In February 1844 there were in Izmir six Jews who had visited the mission house. The Jews brought them to prison, but the British Consul intervened and they were released. Halsted, *Our Missions*, 355.

13 Brewer, *A Residence*, 321-2; *ABCFM Annual Reports* (for the year 1833), 55.

keeping their temporary Christian affiliation a secret. It is clear that not all those baptized as Christians remained Christians.

The missionaries set a lot in store by the "Inquirers", and typically noted the concern expressed by these latter about the force they expected to be used against them by the Jewish community.[14] According to the missionaries' reports, it would appear that similar to the situation among the Jews in Palestine, fewer Jewish women converted to Christianity than men in Istanbul and Izmir, despite their need for missionary benefits, primarily medical aid and education for their daughters.[15] Most of the converts were young and poor, but some were middle-aged or even elderly; a few belonged to the middle or the upper social classes, including a number of doctors.

The missionaries often make a note of converts' class affiliation. Children converted without their parents typically as a result of attending Christian schools. There were also a few exceptional cases of missionaries who tried to trick young children into converting.[16] Some of the converts were unfortunates who took the dire step of converting out of sheer despair or personal problems and – most often – the difficulty of making a living. In the absence of personal statements made by the converts, it is not clear what percentage became Christians due to religious doubt, religious conviction, or social and economic issues. Missionary reports create the impression that most candidates for baptism did this based entirely on material or physical considerations, hoping that the mission would help them find a means of earning a livelihood or would provide them with financial support. The missions' financial capabilities were limited, leaving it up to the converts to learn a profession and to earn a living on their own. The missionaries made it clear to the Inquires that they could not provide their expenses. As early as 1841, at London missionary in Izmir claimed that the Jews had appealed to the Ottoman authorities with the complaint that missionaries were promising the Jews English passports, thus impinging on the community's welfare.[17] Perry has shown that English missionaries in Palestine maintained a diversified welfare system meant to provide the basic needs of those Jews who had already converted, as well as supporting those who had only expressed an interest in doing so. The missionaries did not always keep their promise to offer economic support to converts. The heads of the mission were uncomfortable with this type of conduct, and even dubbed it the "bribery approach".[18] We can appreciate that such reality existed in Istanbul and Izmir.

14 *ABCFM Annual Reports* (for the year 1854), 54.

15 See Eliav, 'By Virtue of Women'.

16 About two children from Izmir who were taken by missionaries in Izmir to Jerusalem and were brought by the chief rabbi of Jerusalem Abraham Gagin to his home see R. Palagi, *Ḥayim beyad*, no. 35.

17 Morgenstern, *Messianism*, 216-7.

18 Perry, *British Mission*, 19, 99-100.

There were also cases of Jews who threatened to convert should the Jewish rabbinic court not comply with their demands. One instance was the case of a Jewish man from Salonika who had divorced his wife in 1844 so as to marry someone else. The rabbinic court had refused to agree to the new couple's demand to marry, and the two moved to Izmir, threatening to convert once there. It is a reasonable assumption to suppose that the two were threatening to become Christians, considering that the woman was of Italian origin and the lawful subject of a Christian state. Ḥayim David Ḥazan, Chief Rabbi of Izmir, permitted them to get married, and ruled that lenience was in order in this case, seeing as "the generation is immodest and it befits us to give up the words of the Sages and even cancel positive and negative commandments of the Torah in order to save Israel from converting to a different faith".[19]

Some missionaries stress that they did not agree to baptize people whose motivation was physical or materialistic. There were even some candidates for conversion who had to prove themselves during a trial period. In 1833, in the London mission's early days in Izmir, a missionary by the name of William B. Lewis conducted a seminar of sorts for Jews considered to be Inquirers. Lewis provided the participants with work, food, and facilities for sleeping. He argued that this was essential in order to keep them under Christian influence until the time of their baptism when they would be able to find reasonable work as Christians.[20] He also writes that many converts from the lower classes turned out to be uneducated boors with degraded morals, particularly with a desire for limitless enrichment, an addiction to alcohol, and no conscience.[21] Samuel Farman at London missionary in Istanbul, writes as early as 1839 that if a Jew is baptized by Protestants, the Greeks and the Armenians immediately make it impossible for him to ply his trade, putting him in dire need of missionary assistance.[22] In 1839 members of the Scottish mission's delegation wrote about the opposition to those baptized, which would be set in operation by the Ottoman government based on a Jewish initiative. This was the reason behind the fact that some Jews were baptized in the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Catholic Church – the two Churches capable of protecting the converts against the Ottoman authorities. [23]

19 R. Palagi, *Ḥayim veshalom,* i, 'Even ha'ezer', no. 12.

20 *The Missionary Herald*, 29 (1833), 307-8.

21 About Jacob that 'sinned a lot' and eventually was baptized in 1849 see Mason, *Three Years,* 329-30. Similarly, the London Missionary in Jerusalem from the start suspected the honesty of the converts. Perry, *British Mission*, 98-9.

22 He explained his settling in Beyoğlu, a village inhabited by European residents, as to provide safe employment to Jews who received religious guidance from him**.** Bonar and McCheyne, *Narrative,* 350-3.

23 Ibidem, 333-9.

The missionaries typically emphasized the Inquirers' poverty.[24] There were among the baptized and those being given religious instruction in Izmir some lone sickly youngsters without any income. Dr. John Mason, who worked as a missionary at the Scottish mission, recounts how in September 1848 one Adolf Rizes, an Ashkenazi Jewish orphan of 17, was brought to him in a severe condition after an attack of high fever. The youngster had already completed a process of secularization and studied at a gymnasium. He had looked for a way to make a living in Iassy after having been excommunicated by the Jewish community of Lemberg (Lviv), and most recently had been trying to earn a living in Istanbul.[25] This suggests that most of those crowding within the mission's precincts were not the crème de la crème of Jewish society. Dr. Mason also writes about a convert by the name of Shlomo Hebershtman, an ill man upon arrival, who had already got to know the mission in Iasy in the past. He visited the Scottish mission's infirmary in Istanbul in October-November 1848, read Christian writings, and recounted his life story. Following economic failures in various cities in Romania, he arrived in Moldavia, and then went to Istanbul, declared his desire to become a Christian, earn a living, and rupture his ties with the Jews. Dr. Mason proposed that he study commerce, shine shoes in the streets, or work as a servant, but he intended to study commerce and to work as a bookbinder, although he was in fact working as a servant for the moment. A few months later he sailed to England; he was baptized as a Christian in Edinburgh in January 1850.[26] This was a classic example of conversion for the purpose of tangible material gain. Dr. Mason describes more encounters he had with Ashkenazi candidates for conversion. In June 1848, a Jewish teacher by the name of David Yonah and his brother arrived at his mission from Lemberg on their way to Jerusalem. They told him that they would prefer to remain in Istanbul if they could only find a way to earn a living there. Mason suggested earning their bread by shining shoes in the streets. David Yonah took a copy of the New Testament from Mason, which he read; he also stayed in Mason's house, immersing himself in the study of Christianity. Mason voices his amazement at how the man, dressed in Polish garb and devoutly observing the precepts of the Jewish faith, nevertheless ate from vessels which had been used by a Christian. We do not learn of his conversion in the end; the impression persists that he only sought a temporary economic refuge at the missionary's home.[27]

Conversion to Protestantism occasionally proved the answer for those who had been socially condemned by the Jewish community because of their unethical conduct. R. Yaakov Amado, an Izmir rabbi of the mid- nineteenth

24 See for instance *The Missionary Herald*, 40 (1844), 49-52.
25 Mason, *Three Years*, 306-7.
26 Ibidem, 308-11.
27 Ibidem, 303-5.

century, writes that the heretics and unbelievers of his time who do not observe the Sabbath and renounce the yoke of the Torah have no legal status as Jews "For man and woman are as one in heresy, and his sons are *mamzerim* [bastards]". He rules that their sons are not to be circumcised.[28]

We learn that most of the converts to Christianity in Istanbul and Izmir worked in petty commerce, crafts and peddling. We learn that one of those baptized in the same city was reduced to peddling, while another convert from Izmir who had gone to England returned to Izmir and found work as a bookbinder. However, upon losing his job he went back to England, where he did well. There were also some educated Ashkenazi Jews among the candidates for conversion, and some who had been trained in the liberal professions, as well as having gone through a process of secularization in the past. There were even some who had been in touch with missionaries in their previous places of residence. Dr. Mason describes a meeting he had in February 1848 in Istanbul with a young doctor by the name of Dr. Marcus Pollak, who had a short while previously arrived from Albania, where he had served in the Turkish military. While in Iasy the preceding year, he had adopted the principles of skepticism; he came to Mason's daily to read the "Holy Scriptures". Mason also describes a meeting with one Dr. Agular, who came to Istanbul at the time and was given an appointment as a doctor in the military; Mason gave him a copy of the Bible in German; earlier, while in Iasy, the man had been given the New Testament in French. Even though he stayed in Christian society while in Istanbul, he did not convert to Christianity.[29] According to the London mission report in Istanbul there were 16 Inquirers in 1854 and 13 in 1855. Only five of these were baptized.[30] In 1852 nine Jews were given religious instruction by a Scottish missionary in Istanbul; two of these were medical students; the third had arrived from Baghdad.[31] It is notable that different missionaries comment on the Jews' obstinate tenacity in holding on to their faith, despite their poverty and harsh plight.[32] It is possible to conclude that Protestant missionaries had little to offer careerist-converts, and therefore in practice it was better for those Jews who wanted to live in the Ottoman Empire to convert to Islam. Islamization would give them the status of first-class citizens and various social and economic promotion options.

28 Amado, *Einei david,* 8a.
29 Mason, *Three Years*, 236-7.
30 Gidney, *The History*, 295.
31 *Home and Foreign Mission,* 3 (1853), 180.
32 For example, see Mason, *Three Years*, 345-54.

V. Steps Taken against Jewish Conversion to Christianity in the 1820-30s

Conversion to Greek Orthodoxy or into the Armenian Apostolic Church was apparently rare among Jews in the Ottoman Empire in the years before the *Tanzimat*.[33] We can learn that the American missionaries in the '30s supported Jewish baptism in either one of these churches; there was as yet no Protestant millet in existence, but every subject of the Empire was required to belong to some millet or another. The choice was between the Greek Orthodox (rum millet) and the Armenian millet, which served all ethnic Armenians.[34]

We will focus first briefly on the conversion episode of 1826-8 in Istanbul, establishing the various versions of what happened;[35] we will also discuss other religious conversions up to 1835. This episode was discussed in the past but can be reconstructed in light of additional sources and the reexamination of the sources. The affair occurred when the American mission had not yet established its unique mission to the Jews in Istanbul.

In late 1826, three Jews' conversions were reported by the American missionary in Istanbul, John Hartley. The three were David Bakhar, Ḥayim Castro, a bookbinder, and Nissim Cohen, a young man of about sixteen from a respected family. As per the American missionary's reports, as a result of an appeal by the Jewish community the three were imprisoned by the Ottoman authorities on 7 December 1826, after it had become known that they had converted to Christianity. Henry D. Leeves, an agent of the British Biblical Society in Istanbul, wrote in his diary entry that he had given money to save them from starvation, adding many other details of the story.[36] Another statement has reached us that after eight Jews had been baptized in the course of some two months, the

33 In 1827 a Jew and his sister were baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church. Wolf, *Journa*l, iii, 303--17. Other cases: David, the son of Yosef, converted to Christianity in Istanbul and sent a divorce certificate to his wife in Salonika in 1819. See R. Ḥayim, *Shemen hamishḥa*, no. 142 § 81.
About a young man from Salonika that was baptized in the Greek church and about two young Jews that were baptized in the island Tinos see *ABCFM Annual Reports* (for the year 1834), 87; Before 1833 the Jew Elias was baptized and his brother wanted to be baptized by Schauffler, who accuses the Jews that succeeded in their efforts to disappear him. *The Missionary Herald*, 29 (1833), 9, 307. See also R. Y'israel, *Yad yamin*, 'Even ha'ezer', no. 2.

34 About the millet system see Braude, 'Foundation Myths of the Millet System'; Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922,* 175-6; Stamatopoulos, 'From Millets to Minorities '; Davison, *Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian–Muslim Equality,* and the extensive bibliography cited in these researches.

35 Bliss, *Condensed Sketch of the Missions of the America Board*, 2-32; Brewer, *A Residence*, 306-19, 348; Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East*; Gordon, *American Relations with Turkey 1830––1930.* 221-51*;* Kalderon, 'Turkish Jews of Istanbul', 91-109; Hartley, *Researches*, 208-18; Kalderon also quotes the following sources: Sir A. Henry Layard, *Autobiography*, ii (New York, 1903), 111; E. de Cadalvane and E. Barrault, *Deux annees de l'histoire d'Orient 1839–1840* (Paris, 1840), 237.

36 *The Jewish Expositor*, 12 (1827), 147-50.

Jewish community was agitated by a strong reaction against them and against the Armenians who were protecting them. For the first time, the community appealed to the Ottoman authorities, demanding action against the Protestant mission. The names of the eight converts are available from a Hebrew source which tells us that they settled in Izmit, whence they sent divorce certificates to their wives: Moshe ben Yaakov, Ḥayim ben Yehudah, Nissim ben Eliyahu, Ḥayim ben Yossef, and Yitzhak Mircado ben Nissim Eliyah; Nissim Mordecai ben Abraham (who was engaged to be married), Menahem ben Yehudah, and Abraham ben Moshe. No surnames were specified.[37] Their arrival in Izmit finds confirmation in the words of the American ambassador to Istanbul, David Porter, in 1832, who wrote that should a Jew become a Christian, he becomes a target of repression by his people, making his life insecure. He says that even at the time of his visit to Bursa he had information about a number of Jews who had converted and been expelled from Istanbul to Izmit, as well as the Armenian clerics who had assisted them with the baptism ceremony and been expelled with them. As he would have it, this court decision had been imposed upon them by the Sublime Porte in order to prevent their being murdered by the Jews. He also writes that the Sultan had heeded the demand of the Chief Rabbi of Istanbul, and exiled six Jews who had become Christians six years previously; the six were at an Armenian monastery together with the Armenian bishop who baptized them. According to David Porter, the American ambassador in Istanbul, the six converts' exile left the Armenians making efforts to obtain authorization for their return to Istanbul.[38] Hartley wrote in 1831 that eight of the city's Jews had already been baptized by him, and eleven had been baptized by the Armenians.[39]

Leeves writes on January 5, 1827, about the developments of the preceding few months in the lives of the three converts already mentioned. The three had been baptized in Istanbul after showing religious Christian fervour, and thereafter went into hiding. They were taken to a different house, intending to flee the city. On November 30, 1826, Turkish soldiers surrounded the house where they were hiding; they were arrested on December 1. They had exchanged their Jewish garb for European dress, a circumstance which was used against them at their trial when they were brought before the Grand Vizier and other high-ranking officials of the Sublime Porte, in whose presence they proclaimed their Christian faith. They even produced their head tax documents to say that they were faithful to the Sultan, and asked for his protection against the Jews. As per Leeves' claim, the Chief Rabbi and his three assistants issued an execution order against Ḥayim Castro, who had taken on the name of John the Baptist

37 Ḥayim, *Shemen hamishḥa,* 114d.
38 Porter, *Constantinople and Its Environs,* ii, 212.
39 Hartley, *Researches*, 208.

at the time of his conversion. A petition was also submitted to the Sublime Porte interpreter, himself a Jewish convert to Islam, offering him a lump sum in exchange for ensuring that the execution order was put into effect. But the man refused the offer and went so far as to discuss the matter with Hartley. The great lengths to which the Jews went to put pressure on Nissim Cohen and David Bakhar to recant their conversion were of no avail. The two wanted to remain in Istanbul, spreading the Christian teaching among the Jews.[40]

Once arrested, the three were first taken to the War Office court, whence on December 7 [1826] they were thrown into jail (located in the Kasim Pasha neighborhood arsenal) and sentenced to *bagnio* – forced labor in the arsenal – for six months.[41] This was a common type of severe punishment in the Ottoman Empire beginning in the 18th century.[42] According to Leeves, one of the three was first punished by *bastinado* (lashes on the feet), while the other two were thrown handcuffed into the arsenal.[43] Hartley went to the interpreter we have already mentioned to attempt to save them. We learn that they were handed over to the Jews through an Armenian barber, who shaved them and was bribed by the Jews. The police, once called in, arrested them along with the Armenian and brought them to jail. An entry from December 14 notes that Nissim Cohen and Ḥayim Castro were brought for trial before the chief commander; here a rabbi showed up with an offer of "a pocket of a thousand" (coins) if the two were executed. After being given 50 lashes they were sent back to jail in the arsenal with a different Jew from Ortaköy. Probably, this person was David Bakhar. Hartley claims that large amounts of money were offered by the rabbis as a bribe for torturing the converts, so as to make them return to the Jewish fold. Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador, intervened as per Hartley's request, obtaining their early release. Hartley again appealed to the head interpreter, who demanded money for his aid. Hartley notes that Sultan Mahmud II was aware of the events as they unfolded; the converts' suffering was finally relieved thanks to the British ambassador's influence and the use of money. The converts were entirely dependent on the missionaries. Brewer writes that in his answer to the memo sent by the Jewish community, the Grand Vizier suggested it not despair, insofar as any Jew converting to Christianity was bound to end his days doing

40 Brewer, *A Residence*, 148. The Grand Vizier was 'Bandareli' Mehmet Selim Pasha (15 Sept. 1824--26 Oct. 1828). The interpreter was Yitzhak Effendi, formerly a Jew from Arta in Greece, who had converted to Islam together with his brother. He was appointed to the office of the Imperial Divan interpreter in 1824. He was fluent in many languages and wrote some mathematical treatises in Turkish. He died in 1832. See Galanté, *Histoire,* viii, 775; Wolf, *Journal*, iii, 291; MacFarlane, *Constantinople in 1828*, i, 38; Brewer*, A Residence,* 308.

41 Today this building is located in the University of Istanbul. Macparlen discovered among the prisoners several dozen Jews, three Greek priests and two Europeans.

42 Peters, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law*, 99-101.

43 The missionary in Istanbul writes that the *ḥakham bashi* and his court in Istanbul used to punish rich and poor by bastinado for religious delinquency. See *Occident* (1 Apr. 1843), 36.

penal service in the galleys (as dictated by a *kuruk* sentence). The Kapudan Pasha (The commander-in-chief of the Ottoman navy) punished the three based on his authority to penalize violators in the Kesim Pasha quarter, where the dockyard and the arsenal were located.[44] The Jews promised the prisoners forgiveness should they return to Judaism. Nissim Cohen, who was engaged to be married at the time, was opposed to returning to Judaism despite the pressure put upon him by his father and his prospective father-in-law. According to Leeves, the prisoners were even threatened with execution in the morning. Two Jews who'd been tracking them in jail reported to the rabbis that the converts would not return to the Jewish fold and should be put to death. The three worked in the arsenal handcuffed, overseen by Turkish guards who beat them whenever they were dissatisfied with their performance. There were 700 prisoners in the jail, 300 of them Greeks. These last treated the three converts well, going together to the Agha to ask for kinder treatment on their behalf and that they not be forced to do hard physical labour. A number of Jews arrived on the third day, the father and father-in-law of the young man among them, and bribed the prison officials to make them force the prisoners to do hard labour, and beat and torture them. This torment went on for five or six days, until what was happening was brought to the attention of the missionaries and Canning, who demanded that an end be put to the abuse. The weight of the handcuffs was in effect reduced by half, but the prisoners continued to work. A few days later two of them were hurt while working; Leeves spent a thousand piasters of his own money, anticipating that he would need about the same amount again before the prisoners would be exempted from trial.[45] Hartley visited the prisoners. Leeves was arrested while on the road, in the city of Yambol, by Tatars ordered in by the Pasha of Edirne. This came after Nissim's father sent a petition to the Grand Vizier complaining that Leeves had taken his son from his parents, altered his views, and taken him with him to Edirne to arrange his escape from Turkey. Canning wrote to the Consul and Leeves was released.

It is doubtful whether the Jewish community could have demanded the execution of the converts, considering that the city's Chief Rabbi was not authorized to pronounce a death sentence. The Jews never had the legal authority to mete out capital punishment in the Ottoman Empire.[46] On March 9, 1827, Brewer writes that David Bakhar, whose Christian name was Peter,

44 Brewer, *A Residence*, 313; Heyd, *Studies in Old Criminal Law*, 210. The arsenal building was built by Sultan Mahmud II, and there are some photos of it from 1893.

45 *Jewish Expositor*, 12 (1827), 148-50. See also Brewer, *A Residence*, 146-8.

46 Brewer writes that Hartley saw a letter signed by four Jews that ordered a death sentence for Ḥayim Castro. Brewer learnt from the officers of the Sublime Porte that the Jews had paid 400,000 piasters to the Grand Vizier in order to imprison the converts. The Turks became compassionate because of the efforts of the translators. Brewer, *A Residence*, 308-10. About the lack of authority to discuss criminal law by Jewish courts see Hacker, 'Jewish Autonomy in the Ottoman Empire'.

alone recanted his conversion, going so far as to write to Leeves a letter in which he explained that born a Jew, he would remain a Jew, signing: David Ariel.[47] According to Leeves, he did so because he was unable to endure the torture, and because the Armenians refused to help him return to Judaism. Leeves paid yet another hundred piasters, and the prisoners were relieved of their chains. He wrote to the two prisoners in March, and they replied that they would not recant their baptism, despite the pressure put upon them by the Jews who came to visit them in prison.[48] Leeves notes that he had received funds on behalf of the two remaining converts from Christian supporters, including the French and Dutch Ambassadors.[49] In a report dating from July 1827 we even read of a Moslem who promised to liberate them, along with the Armenian who had given them refuge in his house, in exchange for 5,000 piasters (approx. $450). The two prisoners were interrogated by the Kapudan Pasha, answering him that they were Christian believers. On 25 March 1828, the two and the Armenian were finally released as per the Sultan's order thanks to the efforts of Hartley, a few Armenians, and the head interpreter.[50] The head interpreter told Hartley that the Ottoman government was interested in putting an end to the work of the British mission due to concerns about a political conspiracy. Brewer reassured him that no political plot was afoot.[51]

A letter signed by Canning and dated 12 June 1827, confirms in essence the information concerning the three converts. It addresses the British Minister of Foreign Affairs:

"The conversion to Christianity and severe treatment of two or three Jews, who were baptized at their own request (p. 161b) about six months ago by an English Clergyman residing here, have attracted the notice & compassion of the public. In order to escape from the persecution of their own Countrymen and relations, they put on Frankish dress and concealed themselves in the house of an Armenian printer. It was not long before they were discovered, and they were then condemned to six months' imprisonment in the Bagnio, on the grounds of their having changed, not their religion but their costume. On learning their unhappy situation I endeavoured to the best of my power to befriend them,

47 Brewer, *A Residence*, 348. See also *Jewish Expositor*, 12 (1827), 394, 464-5. He also noted that from the beginning there were those who doubted the purity of his intention to be baptized.

48 Kalderon, 'Turkish Jews of Istanbul', 97, 105; *Jewish Expositor*, 12 (1827), 463, 466.

49 Leeves received 20 pounds in expenses. In his letter of June 25, he wrote that he had received for the prisoners 2,000 piasters, and among the donors were the ambassadors of France and the Netherlands. *Jewish Expositor*, 12 (1827), 394.

50 *Jewish Expositor*, 14 (1829), 146, 150, 394-5, 463-6; *The Missionary Herald*, 23 (1827), 282-6; ibid, 24 (1828), 70, 317; *ABCFM Annual Reports* (for the year 1828), 60-1; Brewer, *A Residence*, 296-7, 306-19, 348; Hartley, *Researches* ,210-8.

51 Brewer, *A Residence*, 308-10. The episode is brought up in a corrupted form by Benjamin Barker, a British missionary in Izmir, in a report written in August 1829. *Jewish Expositor*, 10 (1830), 159-60; see also Hartley, *Researches*, 348.

and succeeded so far as to obtain a material alleviation of their hardships. My first interpreter was even fortunate enough to procure from the Grand Vizier a promise, which was afterwards evaded, for their immediate enlargement. In the present state of our relations I did not think it prudent you insist directly on the performance of a promise, which rested on no public official grounds, and (p. 162) indeed it required much prudence & management to interfere at all in the business with any chance of success. At the close of the six months the customary measures were taken for securing the release of the Prisoners; when suddenly a fresh sentence was pronounced by the Vizier condemning the conscientious but unfortunate converts to a further imprisonment of three years. I have heard no adequate motives for this act of injustice and cruelty".[52]

It would appear that the assembly of these details is based on facts side by side with rumours. The same is true of other news, such as the rumour heard by Hartley "from different Jews who believe in Jesus" to the effect that they are careful to avoid contact with the missionary, insofar as – as per his words – a Jew cannot meet with a missionary without risking extremely severe punishment. [53]

The American missionaries' enthusiasm dwindled noticeably once it became clear to them that many of the candidates for conversion were not motivated by pure considerations, and that some of them were not ethical people. Thus, for instance, on 22 April 1833, Schauffler writes about the conversion of the same Ḥayim Castro we have already mentioned; his baptism cost the missionaries a great deal of effort. Lewis doubted his character, seeing him as a hypocrite. It appears that while in prison he used to get drunk and smoke, and even made fun at the time of the baptismal ceremony.[54]

Rumours about other converts continued to proliferate; the missionaries themselves usually cite them as rumours, but ones which they do not attempt to disprove. Thus, Leeves reports in 1829 that he has it from a Greek clergyman in Istanbul that more than fifty Jews have been baptized in the Armenian Church, aiming to form a Jewish Christian community under Armenian tutelage. He also notes that more than 500 Jews are ready to become Christians, while the Jewish community spares no funds in an attempt to keep them from doing this, going so far as to impose the death penalty upon them. But on 17 December of the same year he limited the estimated number to 150 Jews, calling upon the London Society to send more missionaries to aid him in his work.[55] There may possibly have been additional isolated instances of conversion to Christianity, but the numbers cited by Leeves are groundless.

52 FO, 196-10, p. 161.

53 Brewer, *A Residence*, 317.

54 *The Missionary Herald*, 29 (1833), 307-8.

55 Ibid, 26 (1830), 28; The Jewish Expositor, 15 (1830), 43-5. In 1826 Joseph Wolf cited exaggerated numbers of those who should, in his estimate, become Christians in the future. He wrote that since his arrival in the Ottoman Empire in May 1826, the number of Christian believers had risen to 500. Wolf, Journal, iii, 313.

We can ask why the missionary reports of the numbers of Jews ready to convert to Christianity were so grossly exaggerated and what were their motives.

It can be assumed that the answer to this is that the first missionaries in the 1820s collected rumours from Jews who came into contact with them and were impressed with the initial enthusiasm that there were many candidates for conversion. We will learn that even in the 1830s, missionaries mentioned exaggerated numbers of Jews who wanted to convert to Christianity. Schauffler also writes in 1835 – without any reliable source to bear this out – that eight years previously one hundred and fifty Jews were exiled to Kayseri on religious grounds, as well as that a group of women who shared their convictions (Christianity) were starved to death. Most of the exiles returned to the Jewish fold due to repressive measures, but not because this corresponded with their beliefs. As per his words, this was also the time when Arakal, an Armenian who had converted to Judaism and later to Christianity and who assisted him in preparing a Spanish edition of the Bible in 1835, gave up Judaism.[56]

Some years later a new story took shape about the conversion episode of 1827. In January 1835, one of the Jews who had been exiled to Izmit (the town of Kayseri was specified instead by mistake) asked to be baptized, but Schauffler replied that the man must first be given Christian instruction, and the other did not pursue this with him. On 1 February another Jew came along, also one of the same exiled group, by the name of Judah Hananel. He told Schauffler that after he had been caught by a group of Jews and sent to prison, he escaped from jail, ran to the Ottoman authorities, and converted to Islam. He now wanted to escape from the Muslims, too, and to become a Christian. He asked Schauffler to aid him in escaping the Jews.[57] There is no proof whatsoever of this story; nor does the name Judah appear among the names of the eight converts who had divorced their wives in Izmit.

An 1832 record tells us that a Jewish lad of 17, Shlomo De Vidash, proclaimed his Christian faith and was invited to the Chief Rabbi of Istanbul, who immediately handed him over to the Ottoman authorities, who in turn subjected him to severe torture. The victim was forced to reveal the names of the Jewish Inquirers going regularly to the house of Lewis. According to the record, the youth went through a night of torture, until the bastinado was proclaimed as his sentence. Lewis intervened, and the youth was taken to the Dutch consulate's prison, where he was freed thanks to the influence of the Dutch ambassador.[58] These cases proved to the first missionaries that the chances of a mass Jewish conversion were slim. This was the period when the Jewish public awoke and began actively to take measures against the Protestant mission, primarily with the help of the Ottoman

56 His conduct has not been satisfactory, and he was dismissed by the missionary. *ABCFM Annual reports* (for the year 1837), 56.

57 *The Missionary Herald*, 32 (1836), 135.

58 Gidney, *The History*, 171-7.

authorities. Additional information survives about the baptism in the Armenian Church of a Jewish smith by the name of Yitzhak ben Usiah and his sixteen-year-old son, from Istanbul in 1835 in the town of Dimetoka, in the Thrace region, after they had been sent there by Schauffler. This latter missionary noted that the preconditions for acceptance into the Greek and Armenian Churches were easy to meet, and that the Armenians told the converts that when in church they could pray in Hebrew without giving up their language.[59] He classified the candidates for conversion at the time as inferior and low class.[60]

It is likely that Protestant missionaries in the 1820s and 1830s understood that conversion to Christianity in the Armenian Church was a preferable step at this stage because the Ottoman authorities suspected the Protestant missionaries and opposed their actions. On the other hand, the Armenians were able to baptize Jews quietly.

VI. Baptisms in Istanbul

In addition to the instances already mentioned, a few isolated cases of conversion to Christianity are known of at the American mission in the city during the thirties. On 25 December 1835, in Istanbul Schauffler baptized one Naphtali Lifshitz from Odessa, called Herman Markusson after conversion. We learn about J.W. Markusohn, who worked in 1836-7 and was an active missionary in 1859 in Hasköy, and then worked in the United States. In 1836 he baptized another young Jew, who died shortly thereafter in a plague, and on 20 October 1844, he baptized Dr. Leitner, a Jew from Hungary who then remained in the city and worked as a medical missionary.[61]

Prior to any activity undertaken by the London mission, during the 1820s the priest Robert Walsh baptized a Jew in the British embassy's chapel. The Jew had requested that his baptism be kept a secret, and he went to Poland the following morning.[62] It can be assumed that in Poland he lived as a Jew.

In annual reports London missionaries would provide regular records of the conversions they had performed. In 1843, a Jew by the name of Berko Portchalof from Russia, and on 12 June 1853, a Jew who had arrived from Walachia ten years previously, and on 27 November of the same year, another Jew was baptized along with his children aged seven and eight. The London missionary Henry Aharon Stern writes in 1853: "Our congregation presently numbers three permanent participants and two irregulars".[63] In 1855, five Jews were baptized, including

59 About another baptism of a Jew by the Armenians see *The Missionary Herald*, 35 (1839), 240-1.
60 *The Missionary Herald,* 31 (1835), 334.
61 *The Jewish Chronicle*, 3, (Nov. 1846), 156-8; Mason, *Three Years*, 329-31.
62 Walsh, *Voyage en Turquie,* 11-2.
63 *Jewish Intelligence*, 19 (Nov. 1853), 391.

one Blumenthal, who later served as the mission's colporteur.[64] In April 1856, an elderly Jew was baptized.

Only a small number of Jews, all of them of Ashkenazi origin, were baptized at the Scottish mission in the city. In 1843 the Scottish missionary baptized three Jews.[65] Leopold Rosenberg was baptized in 1844, and he joined the mission's activities in the city. A young Jewish man was baptized in 1847.[66] On 23 January 1848, a single baptism took place. In 1849 a young man of 21 "from a very rich family near Brody" converted to Christianity. The number of converts who were members of the Church of Scotland in the city up to 1851 is estimated at 17: six families and three children, some of whom moved to Malta and to Germany, where they were prepared for missionary work. 1852 saw the baptism of Yaakov Grinberg, one of the two sons of a woman working at the missionary school. The family had come to Istanbul two-and-a-half years earlier.[67]

It should be noted that all the above converts by the American and London missionaries until 1856 were Ashkenazi Jews who came to the city. Presumably, the baptism was carried out quietly and was concealed from the eyes of the Ottoman authorities. The Jewish community also could not punish them because they were not subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

VII. Extent of the Conversion to Christianity in Izmir

At most, until 1856, no more than a few of the Jews in Izmir became Protestants. Above we have seen that at the time of the *Shav'at 'ani'im* dispute of 1846/7, 80 indigent families – and according to some records, 2,000 families – threatened to convert to Christianity, but this did not actually take place.[68]

Before 1840 Giovanni Cohen from Izmir was baptized and after conversion he was called "the Evangelist". He served as a missionary in Izmir during 1840-4, going on to Istanbul in later years.[69] In 1833 there is a report of conversion by three Italian Jews: Joseppe Cantoni, Dr. Victor Morpurgo, who came from

64 He and his wife, who w as also a convert, died in 1893.

65 *The Jewish Chronicle*, 1 (Oct. 1844), 94.

66 Ibidem, 3 No. 8 (Feb. 1847), 256. Alan baptized Solomon, a worker at the mission school in Galata on 24 January 1847. This may be the same person.

67 *Home and Foreign Mission,* 3 (1853), 181.

68 Saba-Wolfe, *Shavat ani'im*.

69 Joseph Wolf who met him in 1826 while Cohen was a Jew, writes that he was absolute heretic, and that he told many Christians that he was a Christian. Wolf, *Journal*, iii, 325. See about Cohen: Brewer, *A Residence*, 351; Bonar and McCheyne, *Narrative,* 330-1; Bond*, Memoir of the Rev. Plini Fisk*, 146-8; Wolf, *Journal*, iii, 325; Gidney, *The History*, 252-4. R. Ḥayim Palagi mentions him and another converted Jew that worked in Istanbul. Palagi, *Ḥayim beyad,* no. 35. About his wife see Adger, *My Life and Times, 1810–1899*, 120.

a respected Italian family in Izmir, and Joseppe Tedesco, a native of Venice.[70] On 11 June 1847, a Jewish sailor born in the US was baptized.[71]

Probably in the middle of the century, Yehoshua Ḥazan became a protestant Christian in Izmir. He was the fourth son of the city Rabbi at the time, Ḥayim David Ḥazan, who from 1855 on served as the *ḥakham bashi* of Jerusalem. In 1851 Yehoshua divorced his wife in Izmir.[72] It seems a reasonable assumption to make that his wife demanded the divorce because he had been receiving instruction in the principles of Christianity, or else because he had already become a Christian. He married her again in 1854; hence, he had returned to Judaism, or had stopped receiving Christian instruction. The London missionary in Istanbul writes in 1853 about two Inquirers, one a respected Jew from Salonika and the other the son of the Chief Rabbi of Izmir, who opened their shops on the Day of Atonement. The Jews harassed them, shouting taunts of "Protestants!" at them. Elsewhere the same missionary writes that the son of the *ḥakham* of Izmir was receiving Christian spiritual instruction. He claims that the Jews attempted to keep this man from converting by offering him money and marriage to a wealthy woman, but were refused and disappointed.[73] It seems quite possible that he maintained ties with the Protestants; it would otherwise be hard to understand the speech made by his cousin, R. Abraham Palagi, who delivered a sermon eulogizing R. Ḥayim David Ḥazan (d. 17 January 1869), in which he mentioned Yehoshua, of whom he said, "may he will recover".[74] This is a hint suggesting that Yehoshua needs to repent.

VIII. Apprehensiveness about Mass Conversion to Christianity in Izmir

For decades in the 1800s, harsh debates would break out between the higher and the lower classes in the Izmir community in connection with levying the meat tax.[75] Outstanding in particular was the *Shav'at ani'im* dispute of 1846–7. The small Ladino pamphlet *Shav'at ani'im* and a number of responses are indicative of the concern felt by the rabbis of Izmir about the possibility of mass Jewish conversion to Protestant Christianity at the time of the dispute. The dispute arose in the wake of an argument among the different social strata making up the

70 ABCFM Annual Reports (for the year 1833), 56-8. In 1826 Wolf traveled with Morpurgo to Izmir. Before his conversion the latter was skeptical and restless.Wolf, Journal, iii, 317-20. Morpurgo is the author of the books *Politique se la Russie en Orient, Avenir de la Turquie... Documents* (Paris, 1854); *Considerations sur la question d'orient* (1859).

71 *The Jewish Chronicle*, 4 (1847), 158-9.

72 This information was provided to me by Dr. Dov Hacohen, according to a Manuscript of a list of divorce from Izmir written by Rabbi Abraham Ashkenazi.

73 *Jewish Intelligence*, 20 (Jan. 1854), 21-3.

74 R. Palagi, *Artzot hahayim*, sermon no. 9 at the end of the book.

75 Levy, 'Changes in the Leadership of the Main Spanish Communities'.

community: the wealthy community members opposing the artisan members of the various guilds, most of them indigent. The argument arose in connection with the burden of the tax on meat. A new phenomenon manifested itself at the time of the dispute: some 80 families turned to the Protestant missionaries, – while approximately 2,000 others, "poor and indigent", also got in touch with the missionaries, purposing to bring about a mass conversion.[76] Rabbi Ḥayim David Ḥazan was then rabbi of the group of mendicants and guild members opposing the exorbitant meat tax. He wrote a letter confirming that he had managed to prevent "many families in Israel" from taking the hasty step.[77] On 6 January 1848, R. Ḥayim Palagi also wrote an extensive response against the involvement of the missionaries "in our affairs" in favour of the poor and against the wealthy. All of the city's rabbis signed after R. Palagi and also wrote an explanatory response which justifies the tax.[78] It was also noted that the city's rabbis had repeatedly proclaimed in the synagogues the excommunications and bans for contacting missionaries. The missionary wrote a slanderous indictment against the rabbis and the Jewish court, accusing them of issuing rulings "of perversion, and customs which had never been practiced in our city or anywhere in the Jewish diaspora". R. Palagi writes, in fact, that "no sufficient force is in our hands" to fine and to prevent Jews from taking forbidden action. The problem remained unresolved for a long time. [79]

The only source to suggest that the Jews of Izmir appealed to the Protestant mission during this period is the city's London missionary's statement about many Jews who wanted to become Christians, but recoiled from doing this for fear that they would be unable to find work after conversion.[80] Saba-Wolfe's supposition seems reasonable that these may have been the eighty families mentioned in the pamphlet as having gone over to the Protestants.[81] Baptism is clearly not what is meant, considering the missionaries' statement that there were only a few converts in the city per year. The number of converts' Gets [traditional Jewish divorce documents] in the surviving Gets lists from Izmir from this period is small, while most converts divorced their wives who remained steadfast in their Jewishness.[82] We can appreciate that the families in question did not ultimately convert, only making threats about religious conversion as a means of exerting

76 Idem, 249; Saba-Wolfe, *Shav'at ani'im*, 23- 85; Levi, 'Shavat ani'im', 183-202.

77 Saba-Wolfe, *Shavat ani'im*, 6*b*, 24, 40, 71-80; R. Ḥazan, *Nediv lev,* i, 'Yore de'ah', no. 110.

78 R. Ashkenazi, *Ma'ase avraham*, 'Orach ḥayim', no. 27; Saba-Wolfe, *Shav'at ani'im*, 12. R. Palagi, *Ḥukut haḥayim,* 'Ḥoshen mishpat', no. 93.

79 Ashkenazi, *Ma'ase avraham*, 'Orach Ḥayim', no. 27.

80 For example see *The Jewish Chronicle*, 4 (Aug. 1847), 291-2.

81 Saba-Wolfe, *Shav'at ani'im,* 11. Levy and Greenhouse believe that these 80 families converted to Christianity and two thousand other souls were in the process of converting to Christianity. Greenhaus, 'Class'; Saba-Wolfe believes that they only threatened to convert as the phrase in the Ladino pamphlet is expressed. Saba-Wolfe, *Shavat ani'im*, *a-b*, 76-79, 11-2.

82 See Bornstein Makovetsky, 'Personal Names of Izmir Jews', 234.

pressure on the community leaders so as to obtain what they wanted in connection with the meat tax. It should also be noted that conversion of this type involving hundreds in a community of 15,000 would have been sure to come to the fore in the various written sources produced during this period. The same source also indicates that some two thousand families more had initiated contact with the Protestant missionaries with the aim of bringing about a mass conversion. There is no record to bear this out in missionary documents, which would have surely commemorated such a mass appeal at length, should it have actually taken place. Saba-Wolfe's conclusion that the poor apparently were interested in obtaining financial support from the mission, but had no intention of converting is right. We also learn that the poor threatened that if the Istanbul court decided against appointing R. Ḥazan as Izmir City Rabbi, they would renounce their Judaism. [83]

Some eight years later another appeal to the missionary took place at the time of an internal conflict within the Izmir community. The London missionary in the city notes in a report dating from 1855 that the Jews sometimes trust the missionaries and request that they negotiate a compromise when internal disputes arise. As an example he cites a letter from more than 600 Jews who expressed special thanks to the London missionaries G. Solbe and M. L. Hirschfeld and asked them for continued protection.[84] It is reasonable to assume that these missionaries maintained their ties with the Jews of the city, also in the hope that they would allow them to engage in evangelical activity.

IX. The Attitude of the Jewish Community to the Converts: Excommunication Bans, Corporal Punishment and Imprisonment

The Jewish community of Istanbul in the 1840s operated as a millet that had a considerable amount of administrative autonomy and was represented by the *ḥakham Bashi* who held broad powers to legislate, judge and enforce the laws among the Jews in the Ottoman Empire. We learn that the Sublime Porte "gave him backing and, when necessary, made available to him policing powers and various means of law enforcement, such as imprisonment and exile".[85]

The Jewish community of Istanbul in the 1840s took steps vis-à-vis the Ottoman authorities to prevent evangelizing among the Jews and to protect its right to impose excommunication bans, along with punishment and curses, upon those contacting missionaries.[86] In the 1840s and 1850s, the opposition of the Jewish community to Jewish converts to Protestant Christianity was similar

83 Saba-Wolfe, *Shav'at ani'im*, 11, 4*b*, 5*a*, 12, 79.

84 *The Children Jewish Advocate*, n.s. 2 (1856), 281; Halsted, *Our Missions*, 356.

85 Harel, *Intrigue and Revolution*, 9; Karmi, *The Jewish Community of Istanbul,* 13-4.

86 In 1836 Schauffler already indicated that Jews who turned to him were forced to give up their intention by threats of imprisonment and a ban by the Chief Rabbi. Schauffler, *Autobiography*, 93. We have found a similar case in Baghdad in 1846. See R. Spector Simon, 'The Case of the Curse'.

to that of the local churches to their members' conversion to Protestantism, which found its expression both in the excommunication bans imposed on the Protestant converts and in the way they were handed over to the Ottoman authorities.[87]

The rabbis of the large communities were resolute and consistent against the conversion of Jews to Protestantism. The missionaries acknowledged the importance of the position of the *ḥakham bashi* in Istanbul, as well as his ability to undo their work. A missionary report dating from 1834 claims that the *ḥakham bashi* had authorization from the Sultan and so would be able to act in ways "secret and vicious" against whomever he liked. At the same time, the prevalent impression was that the community's funding of this position would not leave it with the financial wherewithal to use oppression against converts to Christianity as it had been able to do in the past.[88] In 1835 Schauffler expressed the hope that the new *ḥakham bashi* (R. Abraham Halevi) would be more tolerant toward Christianity.[89] Dr. Frankel writes at the time of his visit to Istanbul in 1856 that the house of the *ḥakham bashi* contained a prison and that he was also permitted to imprison Jewish offenders in the state jail.[90] Members of the Scottish mission also wrote in 1839 that the principal difficulty in supporting converts was the danger that the government might intervene in the wake of the Jewish community's resistance to the Christian conversion of one of its members.[91]

It is worth mentioning that the Ottoman authorities and the Jewish leadership were concerned that the new converts might prove a pretext for intervention in the Ottoman Empire's affairs and in Jewish internal affairs by the European powers. The missionaries hoped that the Sublime Porte would not interfere with their activities, and that the British and the US authorities would assist them, seeing in them an agent capable of increasing their political influence in the Ottoman Empire.[92] We learn also that R. Ḥayim Palagi, writes c. 1840 that Jewish policemen (this means "the commissioners of offences") in Izmir had the authority to imprison Jewish offenders for long periods of time.[93] In 1848, he wrote that excommunication was the only means available for resisting the missionaries, for sheer lack of opportunity to mete out "justice as prescribed",

87 See Bliss, *Condensed Sketch of the Missions of the America Board*, 304-5. Due to the Protestant press, the Ottoman government forced the Armenians to burry an Armenian who became Protestant. Ibid, 308; Erhan, 'Ottoman Official Attitudes Towards American Missionaries', 195-8; Gordon, *American Relations with Turkey 1830–1930*; U. Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*.

88 *The Missionary Herald,* 30 (1834), 139.

89 Ibidem, 31 (1835), 334.

90 Frankel, *To Jerusalem*, 4. See also *Jewish Intelligence* (1 Mar. 1859).

91 Bonar and McCheyne, *Narrative*, 350-3.

92 About this phenomenon in Baghdad see Spector Simon, 'The Case of the Curse'.

93 In one case Rabbi Ḥayim Palagi with other Rabbis convinced the Pasha and the city authorities not to release a Jew until he obeyed the Jewish verdict. R. Palagi, *Ḥikekei lev*, iii, 'Yore de'ah', no. 5. About the Commissioners of offences see Bornstein-Makovetsky, 'The Va'ad Berurei Averot'.

or legal penalties, to those Jews who turned to the missionaries, and to cleanse these Jews of impurity.[94] In the same year Izmir rabbis pointed out that due to the *Tanzimat*, they had no way to punish those going over to the missionaries. Even smiting them on their feet with sticks had now become impossible, despite the fact that this had been a very common form of punishment before the *Tanzimat* orders were introduced. Now that the period of the *Tanzimat* had set in, there was no permission given by the Ottoman authorities to impose punishment of this kind, albeit occasionally "they are given blows as per the number of lashes on their feet" ad hoc. We learn that imposing bans was of no avail and that those going to the heretics were not excommunicated, the public continuing to have dealings with them as usual.[95] This information is compatible with the information provided by the American missionary in Izmir in 1849. [96]

The missionaries typically mentioned the concern of the candidates for conversion about the severe treatment they could expect at the hands of the Jewish community, such as the 1854 report about a missionary school student who was beaten by the Jews and even handcuffed on account of his desire to become a Christian. He was baptized by the Scottish missionary in Istanbul, but a teacher at the school was thrown into jail based on a trumped up charge. [97]

Concern about persecution and social condemnation, as well as concern about the breakdown of the family, may have led some of the converts to keep their baptism a secret.[98]

X. The Magnitude of the Christianization Achieved by the Protestant Missionary Societies

The missionaries' aim for extended activity among the Jews of Istanbul and Izmir came up against budgetary constraints which made only limited activism possible, the budget being based mainly on contributions from England and the US.[99]

The first missionaries in these cities were optimistic, expressing hopes of a sweeping Christianization of Jews. After more than a decade of activism the missionaries experienced a sobering moment; their disappointment in their failure makes itself felt. For instance, Henrietta Hamlin (1811–1850), an American missionary who was well known in Istanbul, wrote in the 1840s that if one tenth or twenty percent of the Jewish population of the city became

94 Ashkenazi, *Ma'ase avraham*, 'Orach Ḥayim', no. 27.
95 Ibidem; R. Palagi, *Ḥayim beyad,* no. 35; Saba-Wolfe, *Shav'at ani'im,* 12. This punishment is called Bastinado, Falka, Tazir.
96 *ABCFM Annual Reports* (for the year 1849), 45-6.
97 Anderson, *History of the Missions*, 169-70; see also Gidney, *The History*, 382-3.
98 See for example Halsted, *Our Missions*, 357-8.
99 Perry, *British Mission*, 17; *The Foreign Missionary Chronicle,* 8 (1840), 82.

interested in Christianity, that would be a great miracle.[100] We have seen above that for the purposes of their work the missionaries took advantage of the social and economic decline of the Ottoman Empire.

XI. Repentance for the Baptized and Their Observance of the Precepts of Judaism

Jewish sources indicate that there were cases of conversion to Protestantism which the newly baptized kept secret, going on with their lives in the Jewish communities. Such people probably had something to lose should their conversion to Christianity become public knowledge, such as concern about the breaking up of the family or loss of social and economic status within the Jewish community. Rabbi Aharon Krispin of Izmir wrote that even though according to the Jewish law a Jewish apostate returning to Judaism must perform ritual immersion, confession before a rabbinic court, fasting, and self-flagellation, in practice this was not done, so that the non-Jews may not hear that the convert had returned to Judaism, for should this have become known to them, the returnee would be put to death.[101] It is reasonable to assume that he wrote these words about the fear of the death penalty before 1847, when the death penalty for conversion was a possible threat.[102]

It would appear that most "careerist converts" in the Ottoman Empire among the Jews preferred conversion to Islam rather than Christianity.[103] There were also converts who returned to Judaism before death. R. Ḥayim Palagi writes that those who did not repent were perfect evildoers, with the Jewish public having no obligation to help mend their souls.[104]

Conclusions

We have seen that the Protestant assessment and analysis of the political reality was a failure from the start. The missionaries in Istanbul and Izmir were not familiar with Sephardic Jews or their heritage**.** They also had misguided estimates about Ashkenazi and Italian Jews. First and foremost, they failed to appreciate the Ottoman Jews' steadfastness and commitment to their faith, or the power and the charismatic appeal of their rabbis. The rabbis of Istanbul and Izmir proclaimed a holy war against the Protestant mission during the 1840s and

100 Lawrence, *Light on the Dark River*, 195-6.
101 R. Krispin, *Beit aharon*, ‚Yore de'ah', 48*d*.
102 See the discussion above in § iii.
103 Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*, 156-96; Bornstein-Makovetsky, 'Jewish Converts to Islam and to Christianity'.
104 R. Palagi, *Ginzei ḥayim*', no. 20.

1850s, wielding the fearful weapon of excommunication and sometimes physical punishment; the majority of the Jewish public obeyed the rabbis.

The missionaries had high hopes for the Inquirers, and also stayed in touch with converts who moved to other cities. Even so, in the cases of converts – especially refugees – who returned to their countries the contact was usually discontinued; it is highly probable that they resumed their lives as Jews without the Jewish public's knowing that they had been baptized. It is evident that not all those who underwent baptism remained Christians. We can conclude that all three missionary societies that operated in the Ottoman Empire acknowledged the fact of their failure to achieve the goal of converting the Jewish masses, and took solace in those dozens who were converted through their efforts.

We may also conclude that religious conversion was a cause of concern for the Jewish community in the Ottoman Empire during the discussed period, but did not constitute a threat to the community's very existence or its stability because of the small number of converts.

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Summary

Jewish Conversion to Protestantism in the Ottoman Empire in the Communities of Istanbul and Izmir Until 1856

This article is devoted to a comprehensive discussion of Jews' conversion to Protestantism in the Ottoman Empire in the cities of Istanbul and Izmir by three mission societies during the decade before the *Hatt-i-Şerif of Gülhane,* the first *Tanzimat* decree in 1839, until the *Hatti hümayun* decree of 18 February 1856. We also consider the attitudes of the Ottoman authorities and the Jewish communities toward this phenomenon, as well as the extent to which missionary societies succeeded in prevailing upon Jews to give up their faith.

The missionaries of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, the American Board of the Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), and the Free church of Scotland mission worked with the millenarian anticipations, and looked forward to intensive activity which would result in the conversion of the Jewish masses. To achieve its objectives, the Protestant mission relied on evangelical, educational and philanthropic activities, and on medical missions.

We learn that most "careerist converts" in the Ottoman Empire among the Jews preferred conversion to Islam rather than Christianity. We study the motives and the social and economic status of converts to Christianity, and those given Christian

religious instruction, and point out that not all those baptized as Christians remained Christians. We also see that some missionaries stress that they did not agree to baptize people whose motivation was physical or materialistic. They relate also to degraded morals, particularly with a desire for limitless enrichment, an addiction to alcohol, and no conscience. We learn that most of the converts to Christianity in Istanbul and Izmir worked in petty commerce, crafts and peddling. There were also some educated Ashkenazi Jews among the candidates for conversion.

We learn that conversion to Greek Orthodoxy or into the Armenian Apostolic Church was apparently rare among Jews in the Ottoman Empire in the years before the *Tanzimat*. We learn that the American missionaries in the 1830s supported Jewish baptism in either one of these churches. The article surveys some cases of conversion in the 1820s and 1830s, and concentrates on the conversion episode of 1826-8 in Istanbul, establishing the various versions of what happened.

In annual reports the missionaries provide regular records of the conversions they had performed in Istanbul and Izmir. At most, until 1856 no more than a few of the Jews in Istanbul and Izmir had become Protestants. The article extensively reviews the *Shav'at ani'im* dispute of 1846/7, which occurred in Izmir: 80 indigent families – and according to some records, 2,000 families – threatened to convert to Christianity, but this did not actually take place.

We learn that the Jewish community of Istanbul in the 1840s took steps vis-à-vis the Ottoman authorities to prevent evangelizing among the Jews and to protect its right to impose excommunication bans, along with punishment and curses, upon those contacting missionaries. In the 1840s and 1850s, the opposition of the two Jewish communities to Jewish converts to Protestant Christianity was similar to that of the local churches to their members' conversion to Protestantism, which found its expression both in the excommunication bans imposed on the Protestant converts, and in the way they were handed over to the Ottoman authorities. But due to the *Tanzimat*, the Jewish authorities had no way to punish those going over to the missionaries.

We appreciate that concern about persecution and social condemnation, as well as the concern about the breakdown of the family, may have led some of the converts to keep their baptism a secret.

We have seen that the Protestant assessment and analysis of the political reality was a failure from the start. The missionaries in Istanbul and Izmir were not familiar with Sephardic Jews or their heritage. They also had misguided estimates about Ashkenazi and Italian Jews. First and foremost, they failed to appreciate the Ottoman Jews' steadfastness and commitment to their faith, or the power and the charismatic appeal of their rabbis.