Motti Inbari’s new book examines the process of conversion, both religious and political, as a central defining theme in the making of the Jewish identity. *The Making of Modern Jewish Identity: Ideological Change and Religious Conversion* builds on Inbari’s expertise in religious studies and political history. Inbari is a leading scholar in the field of Jewish fundamentalism and serves as the associate professor of religion at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. He has written on a wide range of modern Jewish experiences, spanning from ultra-Orthodox to Jewish messianic movements.

Inbari presents six case studies of individuals who underwent drastic ideological change or religious conversions. His subjects are fascinating mavericks in thought and character, who have been largely overlooked in Jewish historical scholarship: novelist Arthur Koestler, editor and columnist Norman Podhoretz, Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel, businesswoman Ruth Ben-David, jurist Haim Herman Cohn, and politician Avraham Burg. Despite their vast differences, these historical actors all went through a process of radical transformation, shifting between Zionism and anti-Zionism, or between Orthodoxy and secularism. According to Inbari, these two types of conversion are confluent: “I realized that political change and religious transformations as in the process of conversion are actually very similar” (p. 9). All six were chosen as people who held leadership positions and were influential in shaping the political, theological, or judicial conceptions of the Jewish identity, albeit within Inbari’s parameters that measure Jewishness in its relationship to nationalism or religion.

The first two chapters tell the stories of secular men who radically changed their political beliefs over the course of their life: the novelist Arthur Koestler (1905-1983) and Norman Podhoretz (b. 1930), the longtime editor-in-chief of *Commentary* magazine. Although for Koestler communism had been akin to a religious faith in his early years, Inbari notes that “Koestler was a ‘serial converter,’ and communism was only one of his conversions” (p. 39). In fact, Koestler went on to embrace and then reject Zionism, and in his later years, he was a devoted believer in parapsychology. Norman Podhoretz’s ideological conversion was more permanent than that of Koestler. Initially a member of the New York intellectuals, a group of Trotskyist thinkers, Podhoretz opposed the rise of the New Left in the 1960s because he felt it was turning against Jewish interests, as he defined them. Podhoretz completely severed his ties to the Left in 1970 and was one of the founding members of neoconservatism. Inbari describes the circumstances that led both men to shift their political allegiances: for Koestler, a disillusionment with Stalinism led to a cognitive dissonance, followed by
his “deconversion” from communism; for Podhoretz, a reconsideration of the position of Jews in America led him on the path of neoconservatism. In Inbari’s words, “Since Koestler abandoned all the anchors of his identity, he might be viewed as a ‘sick soul’; Podhoretz was able to find meaning and thus became a ‘twice born’” (p. 64). While Podhoretz’s conversion was deemed meaningful because he was invested in his Jewish identity, Koestler’s conversion does not lead him to embrace his Jewishness, and thus he stays unhealed in Inbari’s analysis.

The book’s third chapter focuses on Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel (1885-1945), an anti-Zionist rabbi who came to embrace Zionism in the 1940s after the trauma of the Holocaust. Originally a follower of Rabbi Chaim Elazar Shapira of Munkácz and a member of the virulently anti-Zionist Hungarian Orthodoxy, Rabbi Teichtel came to reexamine his position. He blamed the Hungarian leadership of forsaking the Jewish people by discouraging emigration to Palestine. His book *Em habanim semekhah*, published in 1943, justified Zionism from a theological perspective. As Inbari points out, “since the 1980s, the book has been a central feature of the Religious Zionist curriculum in Israel” (p. 67). As a result of the suffering he experienced during the Holocaust, Rabbi Teichtel no longer viewed Zionism as a false redemption, but a salvation out of the miseries of exile.

The most intriguing figure—and the only woman in the book—appears in the fourth chapter. Ruth Ben-David (1920-2000) became famous for her role as the child-kidnapper in the Yossele Schumacher affair in the 1960s. Born in 1920 as Madeleine Lucette Ferraille, she fought for the French Resistance during the Second World War and converted to ultra-Orthodox Judaism in 1952. In order to gain full acceptance into Neturei Karta—an insular, ultra-Orthodox, and anti-Zionist community—she helped kidnap the little Yossele Schumacher from his Zionist parents living in Israel, hiding the boy in ultra-Orthodox communities around the world away from the hands of the secular Jewish state. Inbari argues that Ben-David’s conversion to ultra-Orthodoxy was driven by her traumatic childhood with a violent father.

Finally, the last two chapters analyze the religious defection of two men who were brought up Orthodox but left the religious fold and yet continued to explore the possible connections between religion and the state of Israel: the jurist Haim Herman Cohn (1911-2002) and politician Avraham (Avrum) Burg (b. 1955). The former grew up in a German Orthodox family but underwent a “deconversion,” which led him to define himself as agnostic and to reject a Halakhic (legal) or racial definition of Jewish identity. For Inbari, Cohn serves as a model of secular religion, as a person who was secular and yet worked to bolster the Jewish identity of the state, including advocating for drawing on Halakhic principles in Israeli jurisprudence: “The paradox epitomizes a figure who remained loyal to Jewish identity while undergoing radical changes” (p. 132). For Inbari, Cohn is celebrated as the figure who could synthesize Jewish identity and modernity. Similarly to Cohn, Avraham Burg grew up in an Orthodox home, defected to agnosticism, and embraced the idea of religious pluralism. Burg’s father was the founder of the National Religious Party that worked to implement selected Jewish religious practices in the Israeli public sphere, such as a rabbinical regulation over personal status. Burg came to reexamine the ideas of his upbringing and advocated for a separation of religion and state. Nonetheless, Burg was committed to an alternative model of Jewish identity for Israel. Inbari writes, “[Burg] sees in American Judaism the right model for Israel” (p. 150). Inbari reports that Burg’s shifts in religious and political worldviews were shaped by his traumatic experience in the yeshivah (religious high school) and by professional disappointments in the political arena.
Throughout the book, Inbari applies several theories borrowed from religious studies and psychology to explain the religious and political transformations that these six figures underwent. Inbari tries to explain what motivates conversion using three theories: William James’s concept of the “sick soul” that needs to transform his or her identity in order to heal and reach happiness; Chana Ullman’s *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (1989) to explain how a religious quest can be sparked by emotional distress; and the social psychology theory of “failed prophecy” as a form of cognitive dissonance, which Inbari interprets as a form of intellectual distress that motivates a person’s ideological or religious change. Inbari also uses Armand Mauss’s theory of “religious defection” and a recent concept of “deconversion” to explain the overall process of leaving a particular ideology or religious affiliation. Although Inbari does not synthesize these theories or offer a new perspective on conversion, he does ascertain that religious and political changes are highly individual and are rooted in a person’s character and personal experiences. Inbari insightfully notes that once these figures converted, they “saw themselves as leaders who paved ways for others to follow” (p. 155). Inbari is suggesting that conversions are an important element in the making of the modern Jewish identity: modernity has allowed individuals the very freedom to navigate their political and religious affiliations and to reimagine the various possibilities of Jewish identity.

Inbari analyzes these six conversions with varying success. The description of Rabbi Teichtel’s ideological development is Inbari’s most compelling of his case studies: the rabbi held a foundational set of beliefs in the immanent redemption of the Jews, and his change was manifested in the redefinition of Zionism as a possible agent of redemption. By contrast, his explanation of Koestler’s and Cohn’s ideological and religious journeys is less convincing. Inbari relies on the theory of “deconversion,” drawn from the field of religious studies, to describe the novelist’s shift from communism, and Cohn’s distancing from Orthodox Judaism. The concept of “deconversion” is particularly problematic because it obscures the nature of secularism: as several scholars have suggested in recent decades, the secular is not a “neutral” position but rather an all-encompassing worldview with its own ontology and epistemology.[1]

Finally, *The Making of Modern Jewish Identity: Ideological Change and Religious Conversion* would have benefited from incorporating a greater range of Jewish experiences, such as non-Ashkenazi, queer, or women’s narratives. Unfortunately, not only is Ben-David the book’s only female protagonist, but Inbari analyzes her motivations in relationship to the desires of the men around her instead of taking her own account seriously. Despite these critiques, the book offers interesting glimpses into the relationship between the psychological, religious, and political biographies of noteworthy Jewish figures. Inbari’s invitation to consider the experience of conversion, be it political or theological, as an important themewithin the modern Jewish experience is a welcome one, and one can only hope that scholars will further pursue this line of inquiry that promises to challenge common assumptions.

Note


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