

Book Reviews

So Strange my Path: A Spiritual Pilgrimage, by ABRAHAM CARMEL
(Bloch Publishing Company, 1993). Revised Edition.

Ordained to Be a Jew: A Catholic Priest's Conversion to Judaism, by
JOHN DAVID SCALAMONTI (N.Y.: Ktav Publishing House, 1992).

Reviewed by
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One religion's convert may be another's apostate. Because Abraham Carmel and John Scalamonti were both Roman Catholic priests, their apostasy from their former faith and their conversion to Torah Judaism were unusual enough to endow their autobiographies with special human interest for readers. Both books are addressed primarily to Jews, not to Catholics, and both go beyond simple description into actual critique of the faith which they left and into inspirational messages to members of the faith which they adopted. In this latter effort, one of the books is a bit more convincing than the other.

Abraham Carmel's account, first published in 1960 and now reissued posthumously with selections from a work that was in progress at the time of his death, is the older of the two—and the more unusual, because of the more complicated religious trajectory that preceded his entry into *Am Yisrael*. Born as Kenneth Cox in London to Anglican parents in 1911, he was religious from his earliest years and reports a mysterious sense of affinity with Jews from his youth. Disillusioned with Protestantism in his late teens, he thus looked to Judaism. But the Liberal Rabbi whose lecture was his first contact with Judaism preached a message so bland and anemic that Carmel walked away disappointed. He then explored Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam for more solid religious substance. But he eventually made his way back to Christianity, this time to a variant whose clergy (at least back in the 1930's) were secure and uncompromising in their teaching: Roman Catholicism. Shortly after his conversion, he decided to go the religious distance and entered a seminary. After nine years of preparation, he was ordained a priest in 1943, at the age of 31.

His bout with the priesthood was to be brief, however. His insis-

tence on a self-chosen ministry to delinquent youth (in addition to normal parish activities) put him on a collision path with his Bishop and he was suspended from priestly functions, apparently only a year or two after ordination. Though reinstated, the shock and resentment at his suspension never fully left. The Jewish histories of Christianity which he now began reading led him to question the Catholic faith system itself and resurrected his attraction to Judaism. He realized that the lightweight liberalism which he had briefly encountered in his teens was not authentic Judaism. Sometime in the mid 1940's, a few years after ordination, without ever having contacted a rabbi, he made the truly remarkable decision of leaving the priesthood with the explicit purpose of converting to Judaism. Keeping his reasons to himself, he thus embarked on a lonely journey, exchanging the economically secure and socially prestigious role of a Catholic priest for an economic and religious limbo where he would be unemployed, with professionally marginal credentials, no longer Christian, but not yet Jewish.

His first economic haven was a job as teacher and headmaster at an Anglican school. He eventually was accepted into probationary status by the Chief Rabbinate of England. An important milestone in his journey was the offer of a teaching position at a Jewish boys' school, where he acquired both human contacts and a public role in the Jewish community. Finally, after five years of study and probation (and ten years after his ordination to the priesthood), he entered the *mikve*. He was to spend the rest of his life educating Jewish children in the humanities, continuing in England for several years, then in Israel, and finally in the U.S., at the Yeshivah of Flatbush, where he taught for more than two decades before his death. The book is a model of discretion and privacy. He gives no details about his family life after his conversion. And the themes of Christianity and priesthood gently drop out of sight after the chapter on his conversion.

Not so the book by John David Scalamonti, another ex-priest who converted to Judaism. The book's title itself blazons forth a "Catholic priest's conversion," hinting of a saga of a spiritual tug-of-war in which *aron kodesh* wins out over tabernacle. In actual fact, the author (unlike Carmel) had neither knowledge of or interest in Judaism before he had already left the priesthood. His fascination with Judaism came while he was assistant manager of a Silver Springs steakhouse, enamored of a Jewish college student (his future wife) who worked for him as a part-time waitress but refused to date gentiles. Scalamonti had abandoned his chalice well before he had ever heard of a kiddush cup; the title of

his book must be judged as somewhat sensationalistic and misleading.

With this caveat, readers will nonetheless be treated to the humanly fascinating account of a three phase life: Catholicism (7 chapters), disintegration (3 chapters), and Judaism (8 chapters). The Catholic phase covers the author's youth (he was born Catholic), 13 years of seminary training, and 3 or 4 years of priesthood. The author was to the Catholic priesthood somewhat what a Reform rabbi is to Orthodoxy. He resented seminary restrictions against smoking, drinking, secular magazines, T.V., and movies. Once ordained, he told penitents to ignore Church law and practice contraception. In working with youth, he replaced the Latin Mass with English "Youthquake" Masses based on guitar music and Beatle songs. As with Carmel, his rift with the Church occurs as his superiors remove him from his first assignment: he insisted on working with juvenile drug addicts without proper training. They send him to D.C. to finance a graduate degree in counseling as a condition of further youth work. But unhappy at his studies (he describes lonely afternoons downing beers in a D.C. pizza parlor), he requests immediate reinstatement in a youth ministry. When told to obey or leave, he opts for the latter. He lands a job as a waiter (letting a sympathetic job-interviewer know that he was a jobless ex-priest) and leaves both priesthood and Catholicism.

Ktav's dust jacket embellishes this tawdry finale as follows: "After 18 years, disenchanted with many aspects of the priesthood and Catholic doctrine . . . he left the Church." (In fact he had been a priest for only 4 years, not 18.) His conflicts with authority did engender turmoil and religious doubts (as was the case with Carmel). But he left when his superiors' refused his explicit request to be reinstated as a priest in a youth ministry, a strange request from someone disenchanted with the priesthood.

The Jewish phase of his life begins when Scalamonti, now assistant manager of the steakhouse, meets Diane. Curious about his priesthood and feeling sorry for him (he shared his expriesthood with employers, employees, and colleagues) she goes out with him once, refusing to eat cooked food in a restaurant, but declines his requests for other dates because of her religion. Frequent chats, however, generate attachment; and his ex-priesthood, which had landed him his first job and his first date, lands him an invitation to a Jewish home, where Diane's polite parents explore his past and invite this unusual person back for a Shabbat.

Scalamonti reports that it was the glow of those first Shabbat candles in Diane's house that "opened [his] mind and heart" to Judaism.

Though not thrilled at his announcement of an interest in conversion, Diane's parents contacted one rabbi (a relative), who refused to see him and told them to throw him out of the house. They contacted a second one, who was described as Orthodox (p. 135), but who was more accommodating. Scalamonti's preparation and probation lasted "months" (Carmel's had lasted five years); and he was converted despite the fact (reported on p. 157) that for some time after conversion he had to continue working on Shabbat. The petulant anger against his superiors and the Church which dominate the early chapters disappears, replaced by moving accounts of his engagement to Diane, his reconciliation with his own family, his greeting of Diane under the *hupa*, and the creation of a family with four children during 19 years of marriage.

A reviewer of such personal religious autobiographies should perhaps restrict himself to a description and a *mazal tov* to the authors for courageous decisions. But the books raise several issues calling for comment. On one matter both books ring true; on another both ring shallow (at least to this reviewer, who had also spent seven years in a Catholic religious order and learned, only later at age 42, of his halakhic status as a Jew).

Both books are convincing in their portrayal of the suspicions, unfriendliness, and/or outright hostility often shown toward converts to Judaism by Jews themselves. Carmel's description of his acceptance into probationary status chills the reader with its lonely coldness, as does his account of solitude in the circumcision ritual, carried out by a *mohel* in a non-Jewish nursing home, of his being left alone surrounded by "puzzled non-Jews," and of his subsequent efforts to make reluctant friends in the very closed Orthodox Jewish community of pre-war London.

Scalamonti's tale is a similar chronicle of suspicion and even hostility which he encountered from born Jews, their warnings to Diane that he would go back to his old religion or that his Catholic parents would try to secretly baptize his children in the kitchen sink. In her appendix to the book, his wife Diane recounts warnings from Jews not to marry a "spaghetti bender," that her offspring would be "half-breeds." Particularly humorous was Jewish reaction to his very un-Jewish surname. Scalamonti's future in-laws, embarrassed, would present him as "David Cohen." Other Jewish friends—offspring, I suspect, of Jews who in another time Anglicized their names—urged him now to change his name to a Jewish one. Scalamonti had the character to announce that his name was not Cohen and that he would not Judaize it for anybody. In short, the former priestly status of the authors had no apparent

mitigating (or exacerbating) impact on the less-than-friendly treatment that is often accorded to converts to Judaism. On this matter both books ring true.

When they turn to presenting their former religion to a Jewish audience, however, this reviewer found both books inaccurate and misleading. Some of Scalamonti's critiques of the Church are almost embarrassing in their silliness. For example, his heartless superiors refused to turn over to him a wing of their seminary for rehabilitating the drug addicts he wished to work with. He criticizes his "brothers in Christ"—the sarcastic quotation marks are his—who are cold to him in his frequent visits back to the seminary after his conversion. The intent of such whiny complaints is unclear; what reaction would he expect if, say, an ex-rabbi showed up at his former yeshiva with baptismal certificate and crucifix in hand? Carmel's really angry passages are more Jewish in their content, directed toward the arrogance of the Jewish secular establishment.

But it is in the realm of doctrine that Jewish readers concerned with accuracy should beware of caricatures posing as "insider descriptions." Carmel mocks himself for having once believed in the "hypnotic charm" of Catholicism's "fairylane", where thoughtless people are provided a guaranteed "ticket to the gates of Paradise"—a snide misrepresentation of Catholic eschatology. His aspersions on the intelligence and/or mental health of Jews who convert to Catholicism (p. 205) would, if phrased by non-Jews about converts to Judaism, be dismissed as anti-Semitic. In a similar tone of sectarian one-upmanship, Scalamonti's praise of his chosen new faith takes the form of contrastive point-by-point putdowns of his old. Judaism views the world as good, Christianity sees it as a threat to salvation. Jewish marriage has meaning apart from children; Catholics marry primarily to produce children. Judaism sanctifies the world; Christianity rejects the world. Yom Kippur fasting makes Catholic fasting look like a banquet. And—unlike Catholicism—Judaism does not criticize other faiths(!).

In one of his us-versus-them passages—"Jewish wine symbolizes joy, but Catholic wine symbolizes blood"—Scalamonti actually displays Protestant theology to Jewish customers under the label of Catholic doctrine. (It is Protestants who downgraded the contents of the chalice to a "symbol.") A Jewish audience will neither know nor care that they are being fed *shatnez* Catholicism (any more than Christian audiences catch the Judaic errors of an apostate ex-rabbi on their own lecture circuit). But they should note that Scalamonti promotes a variant of Judaism as Protestantized as his dimly remembered Catholicism. For example,

though Catholics need teachers and other intermediaries, in Judaism God speaks directly to me-the-Jew. All God's children are equal; Maimonides' 13 principles are just one Jew's view (p. 129)—an egalitarian insight that would fly in a Unitarian chapel but not in many yeshivot. In short, their priestly background notwithstanding, neither author is a reliable source for Jewish readers interested in empirically sound Jewish/Catholic comparisons. In contrast, readers who resonate to loyalist *lehavdil* put-downs of the opposition will find much to approve of in both books.

In terms of their comparative value to Jewish readers, the Carmel volume has a more solid and probably more useful substantive message, whereas the Scalamonti volume is clearly peppered with more catchy human-interest glitter. Carmel's major message is the urgent need to build and support centers of bonafide Jewish education. It is a clear, consistent, pragmatic message that he put into practice for several decades as a teacher of Jewish children. That is, he put his past life and former religion once and for all behind him and chose a profession directly linked to his religious convictions. Scalamonti, in contrast, appears to be still entrapped in a battle (or show-and-tell game) with his former priesthood. His main message—"Judaism is better than Catholicism, and I should know because I was a priest"—is passionately asserted and reasserted, but of marginal relevance in an age whose secular Jews are attracted to pepperoni pizza and cheeseburgers, not to consecrated hosts.

Two questions therefore emerge: why was Scalamonti's book written, and why is there a potential Jewish audience for it? In the book's final paragraph, his wife, Diane, provides an important insight into the first question: John is not satisfied "simply to be a good Jewish husband and father . . . [He] feels strongly the need to meet with Jewish groups and relate to them his experience." A former clergyman's need for a religious podium is perfectly understandable, and Scalamonti has found a niche. The question then becomes: why is there a market in Jewish lecture halls and bookstores for such an account? The answer is to be found, not in the author's status as a convert, but in the lingering mystique surrounding the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church, whose weaknesses Scalamonti now parades before curious audiences. This mystique is so strong among certain sectors of the Jewish community that, though the author was a professional priest for fewer than four years, he has already enjoyed a twenty-year career on the Jewish lecture circuit as a professional ex-priest, a career that should sprout wings with the publication of this, his first book.