

MY CHOSEN PEOPLE

Abraham Isaac Carmel

(EDITORIAL NOTE: Abraham Isaac Carmel was an extraordinary person who touched many thousands of people with the story of his spiritual search. He converted to Judaism in Great Britain, where he had been serving as a Roman Catholic priest, and soon thereafter went on *aliyah*. After a short time in Israel, he was forced to leave due to illness and came to the United States, where he taught English literature at the Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School. He died of cancer in 1982, a year after his retirement as a teacher, and was buried in Israel.

Mr. Carmel was an intense but private person whose sincerity and strength of commitment could not but impress all with whom he came into contact. He had traveled widely throughout the country, bringing his story to hundreds of communities and campuses. Whenever he spoke, he stressed the importance of strengthening Jewish education.

Mr. Carmel's spiritual autobiography is found in his book *So Strange My Path*. The following excerpts are from *My Chosen People*, a book he was working on at the time of his death. In it, he shares some of the frustration he felt as a convert, thoughts that he had not shared publicly before. The editors are grateful to the Yeshivah of Flatbush for making them available to the readers of TRADITION—JBW).

In July, 1943 I had been ordained Father Kenneth Charles Cox, in St. Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh Scotland, by the Most Reverend Joseph MacDonald, of the Order of St. Benedict, Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. Now, on the Eve of Yom Kippur, 1953, I was lying on an operating table in order to join myself through circumcision to the faith and people of Israel.

Thus I became the first fully-ordained priest in almost a thousand years to be received into Orthodox Judaism. I doubt whether any human being since the dawn of recorded history had felt more isolated, vulnerable, or utterly dependent upon the compassion of Almighty God. I was no less alone than the first men on the moon. One or two faithful friends communicated, as best they could, the goodness that was in their hearts, but they could not accompany me through the journey from earth's atmosphere, through spiritual space.

I had dared to cut history short in my own lifetime, and within a lifetime to encompass the whole of Jewish history. A proselyte, if he tries to live up to his calling, will re-live within his brief span the discrimination, hostility and callous cynicism experienced down the ages by those whom he has chosen as his people. Most cruel of all, he will find much of his suffering within that very family from which he had hoped to draw strength and consolation.

Students of Jewish history know very well that Jews are often embarrassed in the company of those who have presumed to claim as a privilege the "burdens" from which they themselves would gladly flee. If a Gentile marries a Jew, toleration can be granted in the case of those who go through a ceremony of conversion, but why should anyone be so stupid or presumptuous as to seek out Judaism in preference to another faith? This all too common attitude stems from an inferiority complex which many "born" Jews have inherited from centuries of persecution.

It would be sad enough if this complex were limited to the rank and file among the Jewish people, but it is strongest in the Jewish lay-leadership, or should I say, the great mis-leadership that is only just beginning to disappear.

The most unfortunate example of discrimination on the part of the Jewish establishment has been the persistent refusal of the United Jewish Appeal to use me on behalf of Israel. On one occasion, when a community on Long Island insisted upon using me, I increased the sum from \$32,000 to \$65,000 over the previous year. So discrimination is not even profitable!

There is an incredible degree of arrogance in the Jewish autocracy and the time has come to challenge it. Many small men occupy very big jobs.

Most of my allies and truly genuine friends have been rabbis. They seemed to know from the clear message of Jewish tradition how greatly the proselyte needs encouragement if he is to survive, let alone succeed. The very few exceptions among rabbis have been those who were executives, rather than religious leaders or teachers.

I am particularly grateful for the opportunity of teaching, albeit humanities, to beautiful and gifted children. Perhaps the lay-leaders unintentionally did me a favor by excluding me from communal affairs!

Teaching is a rewarding task, but in America a teacher is a long way down the community ladder. He has no prestige or vital influence. American Jews in particular find it difficult to respect a person who is without financial backing. You are not quite kosher. If I were planning my life again, I would give more attention to material things

and, above all, security. Idealism should be linked to a sense of financial adequacy.

I regret not having settled in Israel in 1960. When I take stock of my life since then, I doubt whether I have really gained anything by not remaining there. It is the proper place for an idealist, and the best of all places for a convert. Had I held on for a few more months, I might have recovered from my illness and continued my happy life. Even today I am constantly preoccupied with thoughts of her welfare and security.

My discovery of Judaism and my almost superhuman efforts to become one with the Jewish people constitute the only really worthwhile achievement of my life. It is the only area in which I feel no regrets, and if I had a thousand lives to live, I would want to succeed in this one goal at the expense, if necessary, of all others.