



## Jewish-Christian Identities in Conflict: The Cases of Fr. Daniel Rufeisen and Fr. Elias Friedman

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**The status of Jewish identity in cases of conversion to another religion is a contentious issue and was brought to the forefront of public attention with the 1962 court case of Oswald Rufeisen, a Jewish convert to Christianity known as Br. Daniel, which led to a shift in the way that the state of Israel defines Jewish identity for the purposes of citizenship. At the same time, however, another test case in conflicting interpretations of Jewish identity after conversion was playing out in Rufeisen's own monastery, hidden to the public eye. Of the fifteen monks who lived together in the Stella Maris Monastery in Haifa, two were Jewish converts, both of whom converted during the Second World War and later immigrated to Israel. Both outspoken advocates for their own understanding of Jewish identity, Rufeisen and his fellow Carmelite Fr. Elias Friedman expressed interpretations of Jewish-Christian religious identity that are polarized and even antagonistically oppositional at times. This paper argues that the intimately related histories and opposing interpretations of Rufeisen and Friedman parallel the historical contestation between Judaism and Christianity. It investigates their overlapping and yet divergent views, which magnify questions of Jewish identity, Catholic interpretations of Judaism, Zionism, Holocaust narratives, and proselytism.**

### 1. Introduction

The status of Jewish identity in cases of conversion to another religion or other forms of apostasy is a contentious issue and the subject of much debate and evolution. Cases of conversion to Christianity, long a historical adversary and yet close relative of Judaism, only heighten the tension, reflecting the history of polemics between the two traditions. This issue was brought to the forefront of public attention with the 1962 court case of Oswald Rufeisen, a Jewish convert to Christianity known popularly as Brother Daniel, whose request for Israeli citizenship through the Law of Return was taken to the Supreme Court of Israel in 1962. The case received much attention and was highly influential, resulting in a shift in the way that the state of Israel defines Jewish identity for the purposes of citizenship. At the same time, however, another test case in conflicting interpretations of Jewish identity after conversion was playing out in Rufeisen's own monastery. Yet, while Rufeisen's court case was highly publicized, the contestation in his own monastery remained virtually unknown.

Of the fifteen monks who lived together in close quarters in the Stella Maris Monastery in Haifa in the mid-20th-century, two were Jewish converts: Fr. Daniel Rufeisen and Fr. Elias Friedman. The biographies of Friedman and Rufeisen bear remarkable similarities: both were born into Jewish families in the 1920s; both converted to Catholicism during the Second World War; both became monks, and out of the many different monastic orders, both chose the Carmelite order; both immigrated to Israel after the war; and both lived together in the Stella Maris monastery in Haifa until their deaths. Both were staunch proponents and outspoken advocates for their own understanding of Jewish identity, and both left a substantial legacy of interviews, writing, and other documentation in which they address the issue of Jewish identity as converts to Catholicism. However, the similarities end there, and for two men who lived such similar lives and knew each other so well, their theologies, ideologies, and aims are dramatically in contrast. As the old saying

goes, where there are two Jews there are three opinions; however, where there are two Jews who each converted to Catholicism and found themselves living together in the same monastery, there are far more than three opinions.

Friedman and Rufeisen have each made a mark in the discourse on Jewish-Christian identity, albeit in very different ways. Rufeisen is best known for his contribution to discourse on Jewish identity after conversion through his court case, the impact of which has been discussed in many scholarly studies (e.g., Barzilai 2010; Goldman 2015; Lichtenstein 1963; Wolowelsky 1995). Friedman's legacy lives on primarily in the Association of Hebrew Catholics, which he founded in 1979 and which remains active today, undergirded by his theological thought. In contrast, Friedman's life and his own Jewish-Christian identity remained largely hidden from the public eye, and very little scholarship exists on him aside from his own writing. Yet, despite the public impact of Rufeisen's and Friedman's legacies, their own individual understandings of their religious identities have received much less attention, and the conflicted relationship between them has not been previously explored in depth in any scholarly work to date.<sup>[1]</sup>

The views that Rufeisen and Friedman argued for, while over-lapping, are marked far more by dissent than by compatibility, demonstrating the unreconciled tensions surrounding formulations of Jewish identity after conversion to Christianity. Their formulations of their religious identities are polarized, and as this paper demonstrates, at times even antagonistically opposed. This disparity was only intensified by the extraordinarily close quarters in which they lived, resulting in a unique case of the age-old trope of difference in similarity.

The antagonistic intimacy between Rufeisen and Friedman echoes the historical tension between Christianity and Judaism. The parameters of Christian and Jewish identity have historically been sites of contestation throughout the two millennia in which these religious traditions have existed side by side and with shared scriptural foundations. The tension surrounding this issue is as old as the coexistence of Christianity and Judaism, when the early Christian movement developed out of the context of Second Temple Judaism in the first century, and debate over the issue continues to this day. The formulations of Jewish-Christian identity that Rufeisen and Friedman each enunciated reflect this historical tension, and their very different perspectives and conclusions bring aspects of this historical drama into the present, replayed in the context of 20th-century Israel. This paper investigates their overlapping and yet divergent views, arguing that their difference in similarity parallels the antagonistic intimacy of Judaism and Christianity. The confluence of Rufeisen and Friedman's closely related lives and opposing interpretations magnify questions of Jewish identity, Catholic interpretations of Judaism, Zionism, Holocaust narratives, and proselytism, so tightly intertwined in their thought and legacies.

## 2. Brief Biographical Summaries

### 2.1. Biographical Summary of Rufeisen

Fr. Daniel Rufeisen was born as Oswald Rufeisen in Zablocie, Poland in 1922. His family was only moderately observant, and although the religious aspects of Judaism were not central in his home life, he identified passionately with Zionism and was a dedicated member of a local chapter of the Akiva Youth Group (Tec 1990, p. 13). When Rufeisen graduated from high school in 1939, he had hoped to make *aliyah* and to study at Hebrew University; however, with the Nazi attack of Poland later that year, he fled his hometown with his family (Tec 1990, p. 15). In the years that followed, Rufeisen survived through a series of dramatic events, heroic actions, and unlikely escapes, the authoritative account of which can be found in Nechama Tec's biography *In the Lion's Den*, to which Rufeisen contributed lengthy interviews.

For the greatest chances of survival, Rufeisen and his family soon separated, and he relocated to

Vilna, where he joined the Akiva Youth Movement again; his parents, he later discovered, were killed at Auschwitz. After a series of arrests and subsequent escapes, Rufeisen found himself alone and on the run. At this point, he began to claim to be a non-Jewish Polish citizen of German origin, using his fluency in the German language to his advantage.<sup>[2]</sup> Having successfully convinced the Germans of his false identity, he was offered a job as a translator for the military police under German command and accepted out of fear (Tec 1990, pp. 66–67, 74).

From 1941 to 1942, Rufeisen served as a translator for the Nazis in the Belorussian town of Mir, where he wore a police uniform and was given access to all areas, including the Jewish ghetto. In this position, he established a connection with the ghetto resistance movement, and covertly supplied them with weapons and ammunition. When he received notice of the scheduled liquidation of the ghetto, his warning and assistance allowed three hundred Jews to escape to safety at the last moment (Tec 1990, pp. 134–38). When Rufeisen's assistance in the ghetto escape was promptly discovered and he was put under arrest, he confessed and revealed his Jewish identity. In yet another unlikely turn of events, he discovered a lapse in security that very evening, likely arranged by an officer who had grown fond of him, and escaped yet again (Tec 1990, pp. 156–59).

Rufeisen was granted shelter in a Carmelite convent located on the grounds of the Nazi headquarters where he had worked, and he hid in the hayloft of the convent, where he peered through a crack in the wall down into the courtyard where the search for him continued (Tec 1990, p. 163). Miraculously avoiding discovery by the Nazis in such a close hiding place, he remained in the convent for over a year, and during this time, he read the New Testament and experienced what he described as a profound and complex spiritual conversion, which resulted in his request to be baptized (Tec 1990, p. 166). When it became necessary for him to leave his hiding place in the convent, he fought with the Jewish resistance group known as the Bielski partisans. At the conclusion of the war, he entered a Carmelite monastery in Kraków and began his religious vocation as a monk (Tec 1990, p. 185).

After many requests to be allowed to be transferred to a monastery in Israel, Rufeisen arrived in Haifa in 1959, now with the name Br. Daniel, and joined the monastic community at the Stella Maris Carmelite monastery. Soon after his immigration, he applied for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return, which was established in 1950 in the wake of the Second World War with the intention of allowing all Jews the opportunity to seek a safe haven and citizenship in Israel. When his request was denied on the grounds of his Catholic faith, he continued to press for citizenship, and in 1962, his case came before the Supreme Court. However, despite his Jewish birth, and despite his heroism in saving the lives of three hundred people in the Mir ghetto, he lost the case. He eventually became a citizen through naturalization in 1964 and continued to live at the monastery in Haifa until his death in 1998.

## 2.2. Biographical Summary of Friedman

Fr. Elias Friedman was born as John Friedman in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1916. He was raised in an observant Orthodox Jewish family but began to doubt the existence of God and became agnostic at the age of thirteen (Friedman 1987a, p. 17). He began to believe in the existence of God once more when he was in his twenties, but in an autobiographical essay, he describes his faith at this time as dry and incomplete. He writes that even after coming to this faith in God, "Unfortunately, the God whom I discovered remained for me the solution to a harassing intellectual problem and no more. My heart remained closed, and I could not bring myself to pray" (Friedman 1987a, p. 20). Written for a Catholic readership, the essay suggests that his return to faith was unsatisfactory because it was still Jewish—and in his perspective, therefore incomplete.

During the Second World War, Friedman worked as a medical doctor at a military hospital in South Africa in a position that afforded him great privilege and protection, particularly when compared to

Rufeisen's experiences at the same time. He experienced a conversion to Christianity during this time and was baptized in 1943. Shortly after his baptism, Friedman began writing a book entitled *The Redemption of Israel*, eventually published in 1947, in which he laid out his argument for what he saw as the theological necessity of Jewish conversion to Catholicism. He initially planned to enter the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion, which had been originally founded in 1847 to pray for the conversion of Jews and by the 1940s had not yet departed fully from that mission.<sup>[3]</sup> Friedman entered the Carmelite order in 1947 and arrived in Israel to live at the Stella Maris monastery in 1954, a few years before Rufeisen's arrival (Friedman 1987a, pp. 26–29).

### 2.3. Catholics of Jewish Heritage in Israel

As Jewish converts to Catholicism in Israel, Rufeisen and Friedman were not alone. In fact, there was a thriving, albeit small, community of Catholics with a similar background in mid-twentieth-century Israel, many of whom were also monks or nuns. These Catholics of Jewish heritage were a part of a broader group that eventually developed into a Catholic community that was well integrated into the Jewish milieu of Israel and that also retained its distinctiveness as a Hebrew-speaking community, distinct from the local Arabic-speaking Catholics. This community formed around the St. James Association, today known as the St. James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel, which was founded in 1954 to serve the increasing number of Catholics who were arriving in Israel in the years after the Second World War (Neuhaus 2015, p. 1). Unlike the local Arab Catholics who were members of Palestinian communities that had been living in the land for centuries, these newcomers arrived primarily from Europe as refugees or immigrants, and many were themselves Jewish converts or were from mixed Jewish and Catholic families. These Hebrew-speaking Catholics expressed a specific interest in improving Jewish-Christian relations, and many worked to combat the anti-Judaism inherent in much Christian thought.<sup>[4]</sup> While there were also some Protestant communities in Israel, no parallel phenomenon of Hebrew-speaking Protestants of Jewish heritage developed in any substance or similar organization during these first decades of the State of Israel, and the Hebrew-speaking Catholics were unique in this way.<sup>[5]</sup>

Rufeisen was active in this community and was well known amongst Catholics of Jewish heritage in Haifa and around Israel. Rufeisen envisioned a way of life for Jewish converts to Christianity within Israel that would be fully integrated into Israeli society, rather than remaining on the margins of society. Part of this vision involved Israeli citizenship, which inspired his struggle to obtain citizenship under the Law of Return. He also worked closely with the many Catholic immigrants who were entering the country with Jewish spouses or as members of mixed Catholic and Jewish families and supported these immigrants both spiritually and practically. In addition to celebrating the mass and mentoring immigrants, he regularly gave out loans to help those in need of material support, drawing the funds primarily from his own work as a tour guide (Tec 1990, p. 236). At the Luckner retirement home, he also ministered to those recognized as righteous Gentiles for their work in saving Jewish lives during the war (Tec 1990, p. 237).

Like Rufeisen, Friedman was also interested in ministering to Jewish converts to Catholicism in Israel, but his motivation for this activity was very different. While Rufeisen was opposed to conversion efforts and only ministered to those who were already Catholic, Friedman was explicit in his desire for Jewish conversion. He aimed to create a distinctively Jewish community within the Catholic Church that would be more appealing to potential Jewish converts. Concerned that many Jews would resist conversion because they feared they would be expected to abandon their Jewish identity, Friedman proposed a community in which converts would retain elements of Jewish identity as members of the Catholic Church. With this goal, he founded the International Association of Catholic Israelites in 1979. The organization was later renamed the Association of Hebrew Catholics and is still active today.<sup>[6]</sup>

## 3. Perspectives on Jewish Identity after Conversion

At the root of the difficulty in determining Jewish identity is Judaism's dual nature as a religious tradition and a peoplehood, composed of specifically religious elements as well as ethnic and cultural elements. Until fairly recently in history, these two elements were not considered to be readily divisible, and the modern notion of the distinction between Jewish religion and Jewish ethnicity arose during the 19th century, in the context of the emancipation of Jews in Western Europe (Gitelman 2009, p. 1). Today, the concept of a secular Jew—i.e., the notion that one can be Jewish without any religious Jewish practice or belief—has become a commonplace formulation of Jewish identity. This notion of the secular Jew became instrumental in early Zionism, as the movement promoted the ideal “new Jew” who would be unencumbered by traditions of the past in the diaspora. Ironically, in this sense both Rufeisen's and Friedman's formulations of Jewish-Catholic identity, paired with their Zionism, follow in the path of this Zionist emphasis on Jewish identity without Jewish religion, although not in the way that most Zionists would have intended it.<sup>[7]</sup>

It is precisely this notion of the secular Jew—or more precisely, the Jewish person who does not keep Jewish practice or belief—that both Friedman and Rufeisen take up and transform, but in very different ways. In this sense, they are paradoxically continuing on a historically Jewish trajectory, debating and redefining the boundaries of Jewish identity. The tendentiousness of their views, however, is due to the fact that the concept of secular Jewish identity that both Rufeisen and Friedman engage with is not secular; it is a religious identity but not a Jewish religious identity.

The determination of Jewish identity in the case of conversion to another religion or other forms of apostasy is fairly clear within *halacha*. Halachic literature draws a distinction between different categories of apostasy, and within these categories, the *meshumad* who has converted to another religion is the most culpable and definitive kind of apostate (Lichtenstein 1963, p. 262). Nevertheless, that person is still considered to be Jewish; the person becomes an apostate but remains a Jewish apostate. In other words, the apostate who converts to another religion leaves behind Judaism but retains Jewishness.<sup>[8]</sup> In this way, when the Israeli Supreme Court determined that Rufeisen was no longer a Jew, they were not taking the halakhic position, which would have held that he was indeed still a Jew, albeit an apostate. Ironically, the court's decision reflected a rationale resembling Christian thought on religious identity—namely, that one's religious belief overrides one's religious identity by birth.

### 3.1. Rufeisen's Perspectives on Jewish Identity after Conversion

In Rufeisen's own interpretation, when he converted to Christianity he was not abandoning Judaism, but finding it in a new way. From the very beginning, he saw his conversion as a Jewish move, and an extension of his Jewish identity. When he requested to be baptized, he asked for the baptism to occur on his father's birthday, because in his own words, he wanted “to show that there is continuity, that [he was] not rejecting Judaism but accepting its special form.” He reflected, “For me the acceptance of Christianity was a Jewish step. It was a move of a Jew toward a certain historical period of the Jewish people” (Tec 1990, p. 168). When Jewish friends, many years later, tried to persuade him to return to Judaism, he responded, “But how can I return? I never left!” (Tec 1990, p. 247).

Rufeisen was not naïve, however; he understood what the reaction of other Jews would be to his conversion. He was deeply conflicted by his own desire to convert to Christianity and remembers, “I myself had all the prejudices about Jews who convert to Christianity.

Aware of these prejudices, I was afraid that my people, the Jews, will reject me... The entire problem was what will be my relationship to the Jewish people, to my brother, possibly my parents if they lived” (Tec 1990, p. 167). Rufeisen's conversion was in fact received with much anguish by some, including his brother. Although his sister-in-law described Rufeisen as a “lonely man who only wanted to do good for everyone” and who sought a life of prayer “in order to find inner calm,” his brother found his conversion to be a tragedy. In a filmed interview, he shook his head and



clutched his forehead, lamenting “There are people who lost an arm or a leg during the war, and there are people who lost their soul. He is one of those.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Rufeisen’s conversion occurred in the context of trauma, when he was in hiding in the convent after escaping from imprisonment. Alone in his hiding place, he acutely felt his isolation from Judaism and the Jewish community. Yet, when he began to read the New Testament in hiding, he paradoxically found a renewed sense of Jewish identity and belonging. He read the New Testament as a story about the Jewish people, written by Jewish people in the land of Israel (Tec 1990, p. 208). He recalled, “In this frame of mind I became exposed to the New Testament, a book that describes events that were taking place in my fatherland, the land I was longing for. This, in itself, must have created a psychological bridge between me and the New Testament” (Tec 1990, p. 166).

As he read the New Testament, Rufeisen imagined himself within its narratives, as if the two thousand years that had elapsed since the life of Jesus had simply disappeared. Describing his imagined meeting with Jesus, he reflected, “The history of Jesus is a fragment of Jewish history. Then I follow the exchanges of ideas and arguments that took place between Jesus and some of the Jews, different kinds of Jews. Soon I begin to lean more and more toward the position taken by Jesus. I find myself agreeing with Jesus’s approach and view of Judaism. His sermons appeal to me strongly. In this process I somehow disregard all that happened later in the relationship between the Jews and the Christians.” He concludes, “If you will not understand this, you will not understand my struggle for the right of my Jewish nationality.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Reading the New Testament for the first time in the midst of the war, Rufeisen was searching for answers to explain the horrors to which Jews were being subjected during the war. He had witnessed these horrors all too closely in his job as a translator, in which he had been required, amongst other things, to translate execution orders when families were pulled from their homes and murdered. He felt that the New Testament spoke to the existential challenges he was facing: “I was full of questions. I kept asking why such tragic things were happening to my people. I felt very much like a Jew, I identified with the plight of my people. I also felt like a Zionist. I longed for Palestine, for my own country” (Tec 1990, p. 166). Traumatized by what he had experienced, he saw the narrative of the resurrection of the Jewish Jesus as a sign of hope for Jews during the war. In his words, “Suddenly, and I don’t know how, I identify his suffering and resurrection with the suffering of my people and the hope of their resurrection... Then I think that if there is justice toward Christ in the form of resurrection there will be some kind of justice toward my people too.” He saw his conversion as a way of answering the trauma he was experiencing as a Jew and concluded, “In the end my conversion was not an escape from Judaism but, on the contrary, a way of finding answers to my problems as a Jew” (Tec 1990, p. 167).

Rufeisen’s conversion was inextricable from his experience as a Jew and became a part of his understanding of his Jewish identity: in reading the New Testament as an ancient Jewish book from the land of Israel, he saw his conversion as an expression of his Zionism and longing for the Jewish homeland; in connecting the resurrection of Jesus to the survival of the Jewish people, he saw the Christian narrative as an expression of hope for Jewish survival; and in his belief that he was drawing closer to Judaism through his conversion, in a sense becoming religiously Jewish for the first time, he saw his conversion as a process of reclaiming Judaism. Perhaps nothing speaks more clearly of this than his last testament: “I’ve experienced everything and I do not fear death. I do, however, fear how I will [be remembered]. I don’t know if you will judge me to mercy or to condemnation, but of all the things you will know about me, there is one thing I want you to remember: that I was born a Jew and died a Jew.”<sup>[11]</sup>

### 3.2. Friedman’s Perspectives on Jewish Identity after Conversion

Friedman’s understanding of his Jewish identity after conversion is oppositional to Rufeisen’s;

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while Rufeisen saw his conversion as a Jewish move and in a sense even as a return to Judaism, Friedman saw his conversion as an intentional departure from Judaism. Rufeisen was proud to remain Jewish—at least in his own interpretation of Jewish identity—but for Friedman, remaining Jewish was precisely what he wanted to depart from, and what he so fervently argued against.

In his book *Jewish Identity*, Friedman crafted a distinction between the terms “Jew” and “Israelite,” in which the term “Israelite” would refer to any person born into the “people of Israel,” while the term “Jew” would apply only to “the Israelite placed in relation to the law of Moses” (Friedman 1987b, p. 48). In Friedman’s formulation, he and Rufeisen would be categorized as Israelites according to the peoplehood element, but not as Jews according to the religious element. This stands in stark contrast to Rufeisen’s perspective, as he argued that the two elements of Judaism could not be so neatly separated, so that even after he ceased to be Jewish according to religious belief and practice, his identity as a member of the Jewish peoplehood would continue to qualify him as a Jew.

For Friedman, a Jewish convert to Catholicism—what he refers to as a Hebrew Catholic—remains an Israelite but is decidedly no longer a Jew. In Friedman’s theology, Israelites are the “object of the divine Election,” and this election is irrevocable (Friedman 1987b, p. 48). However, even though he believes that Israelites are the Elect, he qualifies that this election refers only to the people and not to the religion of Judaism. He further qualifies this claim of election by clarifying that “post-Christian Jews”—i.e., Jews after the time of Jesus who remain Jewish and do not convert to Christianity—are no longer the chosen people. He concedes that they are *part* of the chosen people, but states that “there is one, and only one, People of God”: namely, “believers in Jesus.” For Friedman, Jews are part of the chosen people only insofar as they are “ordained, one day, to become an effective organ of the Church” (Friedman 1987b, p. 87).

In Friedman’s theology, being Jewish meant identifying with Rabbinic Judaism, which he disparagingly terms “Rabbinism”. In his early work, he writes that the “new religious regime which we call Rabbinism” is “destitute of divine authority”.<sup>[12]</sup> In his later work, published after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, he refrains from the use of disparaging terms, but still claims that “Christianity passes an irrevocable act of invalidity on Rabbinical Judaism” (Friedman 1987b, p. 82).

In one of the few points of similarity between Rufeisen and Friedman’s understandings of conversion, Friedman also saw faith in Jesus as a way of answering the existential struggles of Jews. However, his understanding of how that would work was substantially different from Rufeisen’s, and while Friedman and Rufeisen were both concerned with the struggle of Jews in their contemporary world, they were far from in agreement regarding the source of those challenges. Rufeisen was concerned with the raw existential struggle of Jews during the Holocaust and interpreted the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of hope for the survival of the Jewish people. Friedman, on the other hand, was concerned with what he called the “Jewish problem,” and he identified this problem in a radically different way. Writing about his process of conversion, he recalled wondering, “How could the Jewish problem be explained? The answer came in a shaft of light: Jesus Christ” (Friedman 1987a, p. 21). He continued, “The historical reality of the fate of Israel appeared to me so strong an argument for the divinity of Jesus Christ that all difficulties which my agnostic past and scientific formation could have raised against the possibility of miracles and prophecy, fell away.” He explained this with a theological rationale that exemplifies classical supersessionism and explicit Christian anti-Judaism: “The people of Israel had been exiled from its land to languish in a shocking dispersion for two thousand years, because it had not believed. The punishment fitted the crime” (Friedman 1987a, p. 21). Here, Friedman makes it clear that he believes that the root of the “Jewish problem” is not believing in Jesus. Even after the Holocaust, Friedman sees the trials and persecutions of Jews throughout history to be a punishment for the “culminating national sin” of disbelief, which he believes to be a “corollary to the rejection of God.”<sup>[13]</sup>

## 4. Divergent Visions of Jewish Christianity

Despite all their differences, both Friedman and Rufeisen believed that Jewish Catholics should be given an opportunity to maintain aspects of their Jewish identity after conversion and to not be entirely assimilated into the Gentile Church. For both of them, the issue at stake was internal to Catholicism; it was a question of how Catholicism should be practiced, and not about Judaism *per se*. Both Friedman and Rufeisen believed that Catholics of Jewish heritage had a specific role to play within the church, but although they argued for the same general concept, the differences between their visions of the parameters and purpose of a Jewish-Catholic community were substantial.

Although Rufeisen was active in communities of Catholics of Jewish heritage in Israel, and an outspoken voice for recognizing the role that this population had within the Church, he was uncertain about what the role of such a community would be. He envisioned a distinct community of Catholics of Jewish heritage that would resemble the early church in Jerusalem, which was composed of Jewish believers in Jesus (Tec 1990, p. 241). However, Rufeisen resisted extensive theologizing about the meaning and purpose of such a group and stopped short of detailed plans for this community. Recalling his conversion, he said, “I became convinced that perhaps I have some special function to perform in this church, maybe to improve, to fix the relation between the Jews and the Christians,” but he did not claim to know what precisely that role would be (Tec 1990, p. 167). Instead, he expressed broad ideals of pluralism and unity, both between Jews and Catholics, and within the Catholic Church itself. Speaking rather cryptically, he reflected, “We talk about the unity of Christians but we don’t have a key for it. The Jews took the key and put it into their pockets. We talk about Christian universalism, but Israel has the key for this universalism. Every new acculturation has to start with Jerusalem”. He continued, “My idea is to fight for a return to pluralism in the Church, with the hope that in Judeo-Christianity these will also be a return to pluralism” (Tec 1990, p. 241).

The religious practices and theological views that Rufeisen developed diverge from the norm of Catholic thought and practice and reflect his belief that the Christian tradition is best understood as a particular expression of Judaism. In his writing, he claimed that “Christianity was not meant to be another religion,” and he chose to adapt his religious practices in a way that reflected this notion (Rufeisen 1993, p. 51). Tec notes that he refrained from mentioning the Trinity in liturgical rites and that he rarely crossed himself (Tec 1990, p. 242). In an interview, Rufeisen explained “You have to recite the Creed every Sunday. I do not do that. My faith is not in the revealed truths but in the faith of God. I am on the way to restore Jewish Christianity where these things did not exist” (Tec 1990, p. 242).

Rufeisen spoke of being one of the founding members of an organization that has been referred to as both the Society of Hebrew Christians in Israel and the Association of Hebrew Christians in Israel, although very little textual evidence exists of this organization, which seems to have dissolved.<sup>[14]</sup> In his own writing, he explains why the organization chose to use the term “Hebrew Christians.” He first cites a concern about the way the term would be perceived by Jews, writing “We do not want to offend the Jews—at least not those who find it difficult to accept one who was baptized, as a Jew, even from the national point of view”. As a second reason, he notes that the Hebrew language joins the organization’s members more decisively than Jewish heritage, which not all of them share (Rufeisen 1993, p. 49).

Rufeisen’s article does not give further details on this organization, aside from an extended exhortation to his fellow Christians to refrain from missionary activity to Jews in Israel.<sup>[15]</sup> He claims that any such activity “results either from lack of common sense or a right theology, or from a lack of charity or faith in the true sense of the word—confidence in the action of God’s spirit” (Rufeisen 1993, p. 51). In a later passage, referring to certain existing mission activities, he



exclaims, “I would ask them: Get out! Or keep quiet, if you absolutely wish to stay in our country. Pray for your church, but don’t touch our people” (Rufeisen 1993, p. 55).

It is clear that Rufeisen is adamant that missionary activity would be inappropriate; however, alongside his admonitions, he also suggests that the *eventual* conversion of Jews might be desirable. He insists that this must remain a future possibility, however, and not a goal for this time. Rufeisen refers to this unspecified future conversion as a “reentrance” and the “rehabilitation of the ‘Mother of all churches’,” i.e., as a revival of the Jewish-Christian church of the first century (Rufeisen 1993, p. 55). Despite his impassioned criticism of proselytism, in the end he does not condemn it for all time but asks those who are eager for it to “wait some generations” before engaging in missionary activity (Rufeisen 1993, p. 51).

In contrast to Rufeisen’s rather vague vision for a community of Catholics of Jewish heritage, Friedman presented a systematic plan for a distinct community that would be recognized by the Vatican. Furthermore, although Rufeisen admonished missionary activity, Friedman’s vision was geared toward creating an atmosphere that would be intentionally attractive to potential Jewish converts. The directly mission-oriented goals that Friedman expresses can be easily overlooked or misinterpreted, however, as he expressed his goals with language that appears to be deliberately evasive.

An example of Friedman’s evasive language can be found in the “Original Manifesto of the Association of Hebrew Catholics,” which he penned. The brief manifesto, only a few paragraphs in length, opens by framing the purpose of the organization as an expression of care for the well-being of Jewish converts to Catholicism and concern for their ability to maintain their Jewish heritage: “The Association of Hebrew Catholics aims at combating the alienation of Jewish converts and their descendants from their historical heritage by the formation of a Hebrew Catholic Community, juridically approved by the Holy See.” The document emphasizes the desire to support the continuity of Jewish—or at least “Hebrew”—identity and expresses concern for maintaining positive relations with the Jewish people: “Within a community framework the convert would be free to develop his new identity in harmonious continuity with his past, to assure the Hebrew education of his children and, God willing, to establish a mutually beneficial relation with the Jewish People” (Friedman n.d.a, “Original Manifesto”). This language can easily lead the reader to assume that Friedman is arguing for the preservation of Judaism or at the very least of Jewish identity; indeed, from his own perspective, he seemed to believe that the framework he proposed would help converts avoid complete assimilation and thus maintain elements of their Jewish heritage. However, in Friedman’s thought, converts cease to be Jewish upon conversion. Their identity as “Israelites” or “Hebrews” remains, but their identities as Jews are dissolved.

In this mission statement, Friedman does not explicitly state his aim of seeking Jewish converts. The lack of explicitly stated intentions to seek converts, however, does not mean that the intentions were not present. Missionary activity is highly controversial in Israel, and is illegal in some forms. Friedman and his collaborators would have recognized the need to veil this intention if it was indeed present.<sup>[16]</sup> However, the intention of the AHC regarding potential converts is only thinly veiled. Referring to the dangers of complete abandonment of Hebrew identity—what he terms “the regime of assimilation”—Friedman argues that such assimilation only alienates potential Jewish converts:

Quite apart from the justifiable criticism that the convert has betrayed his people, [Jews] perceive the regime of assimilation as an expression of Gentile contempt for Jewish identity and a real menace to their historical survival—for if all Jews were to be converted, only to be assimilated, the Jewish People would cease to exist: hence, their total opposition to the Christian Mission. The regime of assimilation has thus become the major obstacle to the admission of Jews to the Faith. A community framework would correct the grave deficiencies attendant on the admission of Jews to the Faith, as it occurs today.

(Friedman n.d.a, “Original Manifesto”)

In the last sentence of this passage, it becomes clear that one of the purposes of the Hebrew Catholic community is to be attractive to Jewish converts. This would be achieved by giving the impression that Jewish identity would not be lost in conversion, and by suggestion, that Jewishness would be maintained and the Jewish people would not suffer from it. However, his other work makes it clear that his aim was quite the opposite. The consummation of Friedman’s vision would entail the destruction of Judaism, and yet paradoxically, in this passage of the manifesto, Friedman points out that this erasure is precisely the fear that keeps Jews away from conversion. Capitalizing on this fear, he follows this observation by claiming that a community of Hebrew Catholics would assuage that concern, attracting converts who believed they would be maintaining their Jewish identity while working toward the completion of his goal of effectively bringing an end to Judaism.

In Friedman’s early writing, he makes none of the concessions of his later writing for the AHC in the 1970s, in which he veiled and qualified his missionary intentions. In 1947, prior to both the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, Friedman enunciated the final goal of his vision directly: it would be the creation of “Catholic Israel,” in which he wed his desire for mass conversion with his Zionism, albeit a Zionism without Judaism: “The spiritual return has for its end the creation of Catholic Israel, a Catholic-Hebrew nation whose homeland is Palestine” (Friedman 1947, p. 118).

Friedman saw Hebrew Catholics as an “eschatological group, pioneering the future of their people.” To this end, he believed their Christian faith would be “no mere private spiritual exercise, but a way of redemption for their people” (Friedman n.d.b, “Logo of the AHC”). In Friedman’s vision, through adopting Christian faith the Hebrew Catholics would lead the Jewish people toward the eschatological goal of conversion of the Jewish people. They would lead not only through setting a precedent for conversion, but also through the spiritual efficacy of their faith: he believed that with Hebrew Catholics as “pioneers,” the eventual total mass conversion of Jews to Catholicism might be obtained. Friedman deeply believed that he was concerned for the spiritual fate of the Jewish people; however, his vision of what was best for the Jewish people was mass conversion, which would effect the erasure of Judaism.

## 5. Indications of Conflict

At Stella Maris, Rufeisen and Friedman shared a home, a monastic community, and a history of Jewish identity and conversion. They would have prayed side by side multiple times a day and eaten their meals side by side, as is typical of the intensely communal life in a Carmelite monastery.<sup>[17]</sup> However, this shared experience ended there, and evidence suggests that the aspects of life that they did share together were far from harmonious.

Nowhere within the published material that each left behind is the conflict between the two made clear, neither regarding the precise source of the conflict nor how it was expressed. However, a careful reading of their published works and interviews suggests an unreconciled clash of perspectives on their identities and roles as Jewish converts to Catholicism, one which illustrates the complexity and contestation regarding formulations of Jewish identity after conversion to Christianity.

The first chapter of *Jewish Identity*, Friedman’s second book, opens with a biography of Rufeisen and a narrative of his court case, which fills the first four pages of the chapter (Friedman 1947, pp. 11–14). The purpose of this introduction, the reader soon realizes, is to situate Rufeisen as a test case in claims of Jewish identity after conversion to Christianity. However, Friedman utilized

Rufeisen's story to a very different end than that taken by Rufeisen himself. In a refutation of Rufeisen's assertion of Jewish identity and his battle for citizenship under the Law of Return, Friedman argued that Rufeisen and others in his position were no longer Jews. In his critique of Rufeisen's claim of Jewish identity, Friedman sought to capitalize on the dual nature of Judaism as a religion and a peoplehood by attempting to separate the Jewish people from the Jewish religion. Positioning Rufeisen as a test case of a false claim of Jewish identity, Friedman accused him of "abusing" the term "Jew" and concluded that "Father Daniel was, in consequence, not entitled to call himself a Jew" (Friedman 1947, p. 48). The effect that this book had on their personal relationship living together in the monastery can only be surmised.

Aside from this use of Rufeisen's story in *Jewish Identity*, there is little other mention in print, film, or any other media of Friedman's views of Rufeisen. Notably, in the archives of the Association of Hebrew Catholics, founded by Friedman, one finds a complete omission of any mention of Rufeisen. The AHC website offers a long list of Jewish converts to Catholicism with attendant biographical information, ranging from well-known figures such as Edith Stein, Cardinal Lustiger, and the Ratisbonne brothers to individuals who are unknown outside of the AHC.<sup>[18]</sup> However, Rufeisen's name is omitted even from that long list. Indeed, none of the many pages of the AHC website mention Rufeisen under any moniker, nor do the archives of AHC newsletters uploaded to the site. This complete omission of Rufeisen, one of the most well-known converts in Israel, speaks volumes.

The exception to this silence is found in an interview with Friedman in the documentary film "Brother Daniel: The Last Jew," made after Rufeisen's death. Friedman appears in a formal interview, seated against a dark background in front of the camera. The interviewer asks him to describe the ways in which Br. Daniel was an unusual monk. With an expression of disapproval, Friedman chooses his words very carefully, listing the activities that a monk is expected and required to do, concluding that one who does not do those activities is not following the guidelines of monastic life. Suggesting that he believes that Rufeisen should have been punished for his deviation from the norms, Friedman adds that in his perspective, the local ecclesial authorities were confused and failed to intervene.

Given the remarkable silence of Friedman and the AHC regarding Rufeisen, paired with the extended argument against Rufeisen that weaves throughout *Jewish Identity*, it can be surmised that the tension between the two was substantial and rooted precisely in the issue of claims of Jewish identity.

While Friedman made his disagreement with Rufeisen public, Rufeisen remained silent about it. This silence, echoing the omission of Rufeisen in the AHC archives, is telling. In the only extended biography of Rufeisen—Nechama Tec's *In the Lion's Den*, based on five years of interviews with Rufeisen—Friedman is conspicuously absent. The book contains detailed discussion and interview excerpts about Rufeisen's years in Stella Maris, but without any mention of Friedman. In these interviews, Rufeisen suggests that there is a great deal of personal conflict amongst the monks, but does not divulge details. He speaks about the difficulty of living with people of different backgrounds and notes that "All of us, including myself, enter a monastery and agree to live with people whom we did not choose." Speaking of the difficult process of integrating oneself into a monastic community, he concludes ambiguously, "At Stella Maris, in particular, there are people with very different values and with very different pasts" (Tec 1990, p. 238). Tec's own description of Rufeisen's experience is more direct: "He introduced himself as a Jew of Catholic religion. Of the fifteen monks who live in the monastery, some view him as odd. To most of them, his ideas seem revolutionary. Still others conclude that anyone making such claims is a heretic. In fact, to this day, one of the monks refuses to return Father Daniel's greetings" (Tec 1990, p. 233). Perhaps hinting at the identity of this monk, Rufeisen commented, "There are many Christians who see in me a wolf, an enemy of the Church. I have even 'friends', priests of Jewish origin, who are not speaking to me."<sup>[19]</sup> Tec's narrative and Rufeisen's interviews suggest that the monk who refused to speak to Rufeisen—a remarkable affront in a close community of fifteen monks, whether

it was indeed Friedman or a different monk—was specifically opposed to Rufeisen’s assertion of Jewish identity. Aside from the current study, no published work explores the tension between these two converts in depth, but all evidence suggests that the source of the conflict lay precisely in the way that each one envisioned Jewish identity after conversion.[\[20\]](#)

## 6. Conclusions

Rufeisen and Friedman have each made a sizable impact on the way that Jewish-Catholic religious identity is understood today, but their specific legacies in this regard are substantially divergent. Rufeisen’s most public and widespread legacy lies in his legal battle for citizenship, which effected a change in the Israeli Court’s legal definition of Jewish identity after conversion. The name “Br. Daniel” is recognized broadly in connection with this case, which is frequently taught in Israeli schools as part of civics education. His impact on society extends well beyond this, however. He is honored for his heroism in saving the lives of three hundred Jews who escaped from the Mir ghetto with his assistance, and during his life he was widely recognized in Israel by these survivors and their families. The social work he engaged in amongst the communities of Catholic immigrants in Israel—including Jewish converts to Catholicism as well as other European Catholics, many of whom were married to Jews—has also left a lasting mark, and to this day he is remembered for his work in supporting these communities. Rufeisen also utilized his reputation to urge the Vatican to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, communicating with Pope John Paul II on this matter.[\[21\]](#) Finally, he has left the legacy of his own perspectives on Jewish identity after conversion, and his non-supersessionist theologies regarding the relationship between Judaism and Christianity are reflected in a broader phenomenon consisting of Catholics in Israel who are committed to improving Jewish-Catholic relations and to eradicating the strains of anti-Judaism still present in Catholic teaching.[\[22\]](#)

Friedman has left a very different legacy, which survives today not only in his writing, most notably in *The Redemption of Israel and Jewish Identity* but also in the Association of Hebrew Catholics. Friedman believed that the “Jewish problem” could be solved only by Jewish belief in Jesus, and he founded the AHC in 1979 with this goal. The aim of the organization today, according to their website, is “to preserve the identity and heritage of Catholics of Jewish origin within the Church, to enable them to serve the Lord and all people within the mystery of their irrevocable calling.”[\[23\]](#) However, as Friedman’s writing indicates, the underlying purpose of this Jewish-Catholic community is to make conversion more appealing for potential Jewish converts, through promoting the notion that one’s Jewish identity will be maintained. Friedman’s theological views are unapologetically supersessionist, harkening back to pre-Vatican II thought. Even after the Church changed its teaching regarding Judaism in the Second Vatican Council, Friedman held on to his views, which might best be categorized as pro-“Hebrew” but anti-Jewish. He promoted a distinction between Jewish and Israelite identity not to preserve the distinctiveness of religious Judaism, but as part of his extended argument that conversion to the Christian faith, and specifically Catholicism, is the ideal end of Judaism.

The conflict between Rufeisen and Friedman concerning the boundaries of Jewish identity echoes the millennia of contestation between Jewish and Christian identity claims. Claims of Jewish-Christian hybrid identity are often more problematic than hybrid religious identity claims between less closely related traditions, and the tension arises precisely from the close relationship between the two. When early Christianity and post–Second Temple rabbinic Judaism were developing contemporaneously and in close proximity in the first centuries of the Common Era, the emergent traditions often negotiated boundaries around their traditions in contradistinction to the other, intentionally distancing themselves from the other. The deeply rooted suspicions between the two traditions that began in these early years have been reinforced over the two millennia since then, and Jewish conversions to Christianity have been particular sources of tension. Christian intentions to convert Jews were—and are still—seen as a threat to Judaism, which only intensified through



centuries of forced conversions and through continuing proselytization efforts. Any breach in the carefully delineated distance between the two traditions can be challenging for both communities, and as the relationship between Rufeisen and Friedman illustrates, claims of dual Jewish-Christian identity very often prove to be not points of mutual understanding or dialogue but rather sources of inflamed dissent.

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- [1] Passing references to their relationship have been made in a few studies (e.g., Goldman 2015, pp. 139–40; Nerel 2005, pp. 7, 8). In Rufeisen's biography, Friedman's name is simply never mentioned (Tec 1990).
- [2] A number of publications have claimed that Rufeisen's "Aryan" appearance aided him in persuading others that he was not Jewish (e.g., Goldman 2015, p. 133; Magid 2020, p. 107). This claim is incorrect, however, and Tec points out this popular error in her biography of Rufeisen. In my own earlier work I also fell prey to this misconception and made the same mistake in my description of Rufeisen in *The Nun in the Synagogue: Judeocentric Catholicism* in Israel, drawing this inaccurate information from secondary literature. In actuality, Rufeisen's appearance as a young man was quite unlike the stereotype associated with an Aryan appearance.
- [3] In the 1950s and 1960s, the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion changed its mission regarding Jews and Judaism from prayers for conversion to interreligious dialogue and reconciliation. (Deutsch 2016, pp. 18–35).
- [4] This phenomenon is explored in depth in *The Nun in the Synagogue: Judeocentric Catholicism* in Israel which also traces how this phenomenon has continued to develop in the 21st century (Polyakov 2020).
- [5] The Messianic Jewish communities that can be found in Israel today are a newer phenomenon, aligning most closely with Evangelical Christianity. Although its roots can be traced back to early nineteenth-century Britain, Messianic Judaism as it is known today began in the United States in the 1960s with the movement known as Jews for Jesus. Messianic Judaism grew rapidly in the 1970s, composed of Jews who confessed belief in Jesus but also wanted to continue to identify as Jews and to maintain aspects of Jewish tradition and practice. (Ariel 2012; Cohn-Sherbok 2000, pp. 15–17).
- [6] The Association of Hebrew Catholics is unaffiliated with the St. James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel. The St. James Vicariate distinguishes itself simply as a community of Catholics who are joined together by speaking the Hebrew language, with no explicitly Jewish or "Hebrew" identity.
- [7] Anne Perez observes, "In their espousal of Zionist ideals and their attempts to join Zionist efforts, Hebrew Christian notions of Hebrewness reflected the multivalence of Hebrew identity in the Zionist movement itself, and particularly the understanding of Hebrewness as racial, ethnic, and cultural". (Perez 2019).
- [8] Aharon Lichtenstein argues that it is in fact halachic to claim that some apostates go so far that "the rubber band can burst" and they are no longer Jews. He describes this as "an apostasy not of action but of person, an estrangement manifested not merely by the commission of various sins but by the complete severance of personal bonds with Jewry; by total alienation from the Jewish people and its history as a spiritual and physical community; and finally, by thorough assimilation into the mainstream of Gentile society" (Lichtenstein 1963, p. 266). By this categorization, Rufeisen is certainly not guilty of this kind of apostasy, and is therefore still a Jew.
- [9] From the English subtitles of the film *Brother Daniel: The Last Jew*, directed by Amir Gera (2001).
- [10] (Tec 1990, p. 167). Magid points out that Rufeisen was following a Zionist precedent in claiming Jesus as a Jew and as a voice from Eretz Israel: "In the so-called Brenner Affair of the 1920s, Yosef Hayyim Brenner and Ahad Ha'Am argued about whether Jesus should be reclaimed as a Jew by the Zionists. In other words, Rufeisen in his isolation was thinking about Jesus and Christianity in ways not so distinct as he presumed from what other Jews were thinking about the same subjects around the same time" (Magid 2020, p. 110).
- [11] From the English subtitles of the film *Brother Daniel: The Last Jew*.
- [12] Friedman, *Redemption of Israel*, 47; 58. Friedman used this disparaging term in *The Redemption of Israel*, published in 1947, but by the time of the 1987 publication of *Jewish Identity*, he no longer used the term.
- [13] Friedman, *Redemption of Israel*, 41. Even in *Jewish Identity*, which is less overt in its anti-Judaism than *The Redemption of Israel*, Friedman hints that he believes that the Holocaust is the consequence of the Jewish "sin" of disbelief (Friedman 1987b, p. 111). Friedman's writing style cannily evades a direct assertion of this in any single sentence, but his overall argument leaves no doubt that this is his conclusion.
- [14] In Rufeisen's own text, he refers to his organization as the Association of Hebrew Christians and mentions that he was one of a team of twelve people who founded it (Rufeisen 1993, p. 49). In an interview with Tec, he notes that it was registered in Haifa as the Society for Hebrew Christians in Israel (Tec 1990, p. 243). The discrepancy in the name is likely due to the translation from Hebrew to English. Two recent secondary studies have attributed various histories to the development of the organization, evidencing some confusion between the St. James Association in the Latin Patriarchate, the Association of Hebrew Catholics founded by Friedman, and the organization to which Rufeisen refers (Goldman 2015, pp. 139–40; Magid 2020, p. 115).
- [15] Rufeisen's views on the shape and role of a Jewish Catholic community align fairly closely with the precepts of the St James Association, founded in 1955. For more detailed histories of the St. James Association, now known as the Saint James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel, see (Rioli 2020, pp. 213–55; Polyakov 2020, pp. 174–78).
- [16] Goldman notes, "The Israeli authorities had little tolerance for Friedman's approach, as they considered it missionary activity on the part of the Catholic Church. The Israeli government was interested in bringing apostates back to Judaism, not in facilitating the apostasy of Israeli Jews to Catholicism" (Goldman 2015, p. 140).
- [17] Rufeisen's activities occasionally broke with the monastic rules and convention, however, and he did not always participate in all the daily activities that would be expected of a Carmelite monk (Tec 1990, p. 234). Nevertheless, the daily routine described above would still be typical in a Carmelite monastery such as Stella Maris.
- [18] <https://www.hebrewcatholic.net/hc-individuals/> (accessed on 29 November 2021).
- [19] *ibid.*, p. 239. Friedman and other monks at Stella Maris were also ordained priests, so this comment does not exclude Friedman.
- [20] Shalom Goldman touches on this tension very briefly, in the context of a chapter on Rufeisen. Sharing an anecdote from his visit to Stella Maris in 2010, he writes "I asked one of the resident monks, Father John Landy, how these two very different personalities, Brother Daniel and Father Elias Friedman, had gotten along. He replied, 'Two Jews in a Monastery? They argued all the time!'" (Goldman 2015, p. 140).
- [21] Rufeisen had an audience with John Paul II in 1984 and pressed the pope to allow the Vatican to recognize Israel, nearly a decade before Vatican-Israel diplomatic relations began in 1993. When the pope was planning to meet with Arafat, Rufeisen sent him a message urging him to not do it because he believed it would not be beneficial to Israel. The pope did not reply to this message and later publicly embraced Arafat. (Tec 1990, pp. 243–44).
- [22] For a deeper look into this phenomenon as it has developed among Jewish converts to Catholicism as well as other Catholics in Israel, see (Polyakov 2020).
- [23] <https://www.hebrewcatholic.net/about-the-ach/> (accessed on 29 November 2021).

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