

Schinker, Ellie R. *Confessions of the Shtetl: Converts from Judaism in Imperial Russia, 1817-1906.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 340 pp. \$65.00. (9780804798280).

During the nineteenth century nearly 85,000 Jews of the Pale converted to Christianity. Based on contemporary records and personal accounts, this demographic is presented as a natural outcome of the shifting political, legal, and cultural landscape. The word “confessions” refers to the modes of Christian worship—chiefly Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran—which co-existed under the Tsarist regime and sought to attract Jews. Until 1861, under the reign of Nicholas I, the church welcomed many Cantonists, Jewish conscripts who often acted under duress or desire to assimilate into the Russian military. Forcible conversions were outlawed under the liberal Alexander II; instead, they reflected the growing cosmopolitanism within the empire—particularly the tavern, “the missionary marketplace,” many of which were Jewishly run and provided opportunities to mingle with people of other backgrounds. Gender is also analyzed: women who abandoned Judaism risked destabilizing the family, creating conflicts in *halacha* and threatening patriarchal control. Although, contrary to the myth of being shunned or disowned, many apostates maintained contact with former community, some relatives violently protested, reinforcing Jewish separatism and loyalty. Many converts remained adrift in both worlds; the author discusses those who relapsed, returning to their former faith—decriminalized after 1906—or seeking self-expression in hybridized or underground sects.

Nuanced and well researched, with newly released material, this book strives to remain non-judgmental toward a painful subject in religious history, while raising issues of national identity. Recommended for academic libraries with Jewish or Russian Studies collections.

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Schwartz, Barry L. *Path of the Prophets: the Ethics-Driven Life.* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2018. 286 pp. \$19.95. (9780827613096).

Barry Schwartz is director of the Jewish Publication Society and a rabbi in New Jersey; he has also written *Judaism's Great Debates* and *Jewish Heroes, Jewish Values*, among others. *Path of the Prophets* is divided into three parts, with each part dedicated to a specific biblical theme. The first part is dedicated to justice and includes reflections on Abraham, Moses, and Samuel; the second part is dedicated to mercy and includes reflections on Joseph, Ruth, and Jeremiah, and the last part is dedicated to humility and includes reflections on Miriam, Elijah, and Isaiah. Following the text is a glossary of prophetic terminology used in the book and a study guide that could be useful in pedagogy. This title would be a fine addition to any collection used by adult readers.

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Shuchat, Wilfred, *Abraham and the Challenge of Faith According to the Midrash Rabbah.* New York: Devora Publishing, 2017. 567 pp. \$29.82. (9789655242737).

In this introductory work, Rabbi Shuchat draws on the commentaries on Abraham in Midrash Rabbah, specifically in the *parashot Lekh Lekha* and *Vayera*; he then selects the important themes within the Midrash for further exploration. After reproducing each section in English, Rabbi Shuchat provides what he calls “seed thoughts” and “additional commentary”.

Shuchat’s selected focus is a logical and natural outgrowth of his previous work on Genesis on Creation, The Garden of Eden, The Flood, and other sections leading up to *Lekh Lekhah*. Rabbi Shuchat notes that his particular focus in Genesis Rabbah not only centers on the personality of Abraham, but teaches the reader to see in Abraham, as the first Jew, the ideal representative of moral character and a source of blessing.

Shuchat’s work of interpretation and analysis makes these texts and such values easily accessible to laymen and clergy alike. The work may inspire readers to take the next step and tackle the text in the original Midrashic Hebrew as well as its various super commentaries. Recommended

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