

THE STORY OF A MODERN MISSIONARY TO AN ANCIENT PEOPLE

by

Leopold Cohn

Copyright © 1908

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY LIFE AND TRAINING

I was born in 1862 at Berezna, a little town in the east of Hungary, where I was brought up in Orthodox Judaism. The Jews there look upon Christianity as a phase of heathenism, for the Catholics openly exhibit their idolatrous habits, prostrating themselves on the public highways before crosses and images, practices greatly abhorred by the Jews because they were forbidden to Israel by Moses. Their priests are generally addicted to drink and are bitter enemies of the Jews, inciting the peasants to injure them in every possible way. Because of these things, I was taught to avoid Gentiles, not even to take a drink of water from their vessels. The Jews know nothing of Jesus Christ and His claims to the Messiahship. They do not connect the two names, but think of Christ simply as referring to the word cross. They do not know of His teachings or of the existence of a book called the New Testament.

At the age of seven, my father and mother died in the same year and left me to shift for myself as best I could. Thus I early learned to trust God and often prayed Him to teach me His ways. When thirteen years old, I decided to study to be a rabbi or a leader of my people, the most honorable and meritorious life-office for a Jew.

Description of the Talmud

The main study of one who proposes to become a rabbi, is the Talmud. While mentioning this book, may I tell you what it is, as I meet so many Christians who ask "What kind of a book is the Talmud?"

The Talmud comprises sixty books which contain all the Jewish civil canonical laws. The number of these laws is legion. One commandment of the Decalogue, "**Six days shalt thou labour,**" etc., "**but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God,**" is explained by the Talmudic doctors in four hundred and sixteen sections, each section containing from eight to twenty divisions, giving the most minute directions for the observance of the Talmudic Sabbath Laws. The Jews believe that all these, as well as the many thousands of rules and precepts appointed by the wise men are as holy and binding as the Ten Commandments because they have a tradition that the Pentateuch, which Israel was commanded to put in writing, is only the text, and the Talmud is the explanation God gave to Moses by word of mouth on Mount Sinai.

Moses, when he gave the written law, delivered also this oral law to the people, who repeated it until fixed in their memory. Each generation transmitted it to the next, until about the fourth century, A. D., when the different laws and discourses were collected, compiled, written down, and completed.

Ever since that time the Jews make these books their chief study, day and night, not only for the sake of knowing the different laws, or of becoming rabbis, but because they believe that in studying the Talmud they render the greatest service to God, as the Talmud itself says, "there is no more meritorious study than that of the oral law." So I was a very good boy when I devoted nearly all my time to the Talmud and almost none to the Prophets.

Graduation and Marriage

At about eighteen years of age I was proficient in Hebrew literature and Talmudic law. I then received from several rabbis, in whose colleges I had studied, a diploma containing a certificate of my good character and acquirements and an authority to become a rabbi. This was confirmed by my first and chief rabbi, a miracle-performer, S. L. Teitelbaum, in Sziget.

In a town nearby lived a wealthy Jew who consulted with this great miracle-performing rabbi about taking me for his son-in-law, as he desired to marry his youngest daughter Rose to a rabbi. When consent was given, I was called, and according to the custom there, arrangement was made as to how large a sum of money the father-in-law was to give me before I married his pretty and highly accomplished young daughter. Our marriage was consummated in 1880.

In the house of my father-in-law I was very happy, and always thanked God for giving me at last, after much hard labor in studying, so delightful a home. Many marks of honor were shown me, and I received tokens of love and of kindness on all sides and the days I spent under my father-in-law's roof were the brightest in my life. About a year after my marriage my father-in-law died.

Very soon after my marriage some people began to ask me questions as a rabbi, for they knew that I had attained to that position, but I refused to deal with them, as I lived near to my teacher in Sziget, and it is not lawful for a disciple to decide religious questions while his rabbi lives in the same district.

Several years later, when that rabbi died, I was called to practice my rabbinical duties in three congregations. For years they sought the law at my mouth. I decided among them all the different religious questions concerning worship, meat and milk, wine of libation, and the laws concerning slaughtering of animals. If two had a quarrel, which led them to go to the law, they came to me and accepted my decision without further appeal, for such is the Jewish rule. So I was both the lawyer and the judge. Every controversy was settled by my word, and at times I was called to distant places to decide cases, as my methods seemed to be liked.

During my leisure, I had frequent recourse to my Talmud, in which I at one time read the following: "The world is to stand six thousand years, viz., two thousand confusion and void, two thousand with the law, and two thousand the time of Messiah.

Rashi, the very first and most authoritative commentator gives as an explanation on the last clause: "Because after the second two thousand years, the Messiah must have come and the wicked kingdom should have been destroyed."

This greatly excited my attention. I was accustomed to sit on the ground almost every Thursday night at twelve o'clock, weeping, crying, and mourning for about an hour, over the destruction of Jerusalem (called by the Jews "*Tickin Chazoss*") and repeating the 137th Psalm. I was very anxiously awaiting the coming of our Messiah, and now I saw that his time was over two thousand years ago, according to the Jewish reckoning.

I was surprised, and asked myself, "Is it possible that the time which God had fixed for the appearance of our Messiah has passed away without the promise of our true and living God being fulfilled?" I never had had any doubt of the truthfulness of the Talmud; I believed every part of it to be holy, but now I looked upon this passage as a simple legend. It was then that I decided to search the Prophets concerning the time of the Messiah.

Early Researches

My first thought was to study Daniel, but I soon recollected that the Talmud curses one who studies concerning the end of the age, especially that part of Daniel which refers to the coming of the Messiah and the end of the times. "The bones of him who studies and calculates the ends" (meaning the time of the Messiah) "shall be blown up," says the Talmud.

Defying the Curse

This sent terror into my heart and I thought that the minute I began to read that part of Daniel, a thunderbolt would come down from Heaven and strike me dead. But another thought came, suggesting that those Talmudists who made such statements must themselves have studied Daniel and the other Scriptures concerning the coming of the Messiah, and if they did it, so would I.

With fear and trembling, I opened the book, glanced over it, dwelling particularly on the ninth chapter. My research led me to blame myself for suspecting the holy words of the wise men. While I could see only as through a glass, for I was totally ignorant of Jesus the Messiah, who was cut off not for Himself, and therefore could not understand thoroughly that the Messiah must have died for our sins, yet I realized dimly that the Messiah must have come about four hundred years after Daniel was told by the angel about the seventy weeks.

There was gladness in my heart, to find it true that the Messiah should have come about that time, according to Daniel, 9: 24. But it was a joy mingled with sorrow. "Why has He not come?" Mind you, dear reader, how you could have gladdened my sorrowful heart by giving me a New Testament, a book whose existence was utterly unknown to me at that time. I, therefore, continued to study the Prophets with greater zeal. Whilst doing so, the pure spirit of God's Word took hold of my mind and heart. I then discovered that much of the Talmudic law is contrary to the Word of God. Then what a great struggle within, between light and darkness!

I used to go into my large garden, and under an apple tree, cry like a little child, entreating,
“**Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.**”

A Memorable Feast

I could find no rest or peace for my troubled soul. I asked a good many other rabbis about the Messiah and how they reconciled certain passages of the Talmud with the Word of God, but I received no satisfactory answer.

A little later, I was preaching, at that season, on a subject connected with the “Feast of Dedication.” I had not intended to tell anything publicly of what was so deep in my heart, because of fear of persecution, but God, who causes the dumb to speak, opened my mouth, and I revealed unto them all my discoveries.

Probably they would have believed the discovery about the Messiah, since we were all ignorant of the fact that such a disclosure related to the Crucified One, but when they heard me finding so much fault with the holy Talmud, that was quite enough to make them hiss and wag their heads at me, and finally to leave me quite alone, preaching to the empty benches.

Bitter persecution followed.

~ end of chapter 1 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
