

The Converter Belt

BY ROBERT E. SEGAL

In these easy-does-it days of Jesus Christ Superstar and "Jews For Jesus," it was inevitable that Madison Avenue would get a cut of the new evangelical pie.

And what a profitable take-home it must have been for some advertising people when Beth Sar Shalom Fellowship ran that full page ad with the devastating banner line: "So Many Jews are Wearing 'That Smile' Nowadays!"

You know the : Way Back in 1894, Leopold Cohn, who is said to have been a rabbi of Austrian-Hungarian origin, converted to Christianity and began trying to bring Jews in the Brownsville section to his adopted faith. Along the way, Cohn established Beth Sar Shalom Fellowship; and in our own days of rootlessness, doubt, and easy transformation, we have before us the page advertisement inviting us to have our matzo and eat it too---just in time for your used religious dealer's joint Easter-Pass-over. Prospects are urged in large type to acknowledge the Great Jew as the Messiah, yet not to give up being Jewish. For good measure, so the copywriter says, "the Christian church is being enriched by adding Jewish Christians."

Proselytizing by folks born Jewish is not new. As long ago as 1948, a national study showed that "ex-Jews" using the new power of radio, pamphlet, and direct mail were picking

up a million dollars a year. A.U. Michelson and Joseph Hoffman Cohn, the former with his Hebrew Evangelization Society, and Joseph Cohn with his American Board of Missions were doing quite well. Canned radio sermons sputtered apologetically but profitably into the air. You may remember Joe Cohn saying: "We with wicked hands did reject and take part in the slaying of the Lord; that is why our prayers have gone unanswered. The first thing we have to do is to confess that terrible thing of which we are guilty." (That's the first assignment; Number 2 is to send a check.)

David Goldstein, whose strictures against Jews were given generous space in the religious press, asserted that "when Jews enter the Catholic Church, they pass from the caterpillar to the butterfly stage of Judaism." And down through the years, offers to Jews to pick up bargains in the good life were pouring forth from the Light of Israel out of Denver, the Pilgrim Tract Society in Randleman, North Carolina, and the Christ Gospel Mission in West Palm Beach.

Now it is quite true that reputable Jewish leaders have at odd times in history engaged in conversion efforts. The Maccabean leader, Simon, was committed to proselytization efforts a century and a half before the common era; and as paganism faded some what, converts to Judaism were sought unabashedly. History records that in the seventh century, before the rise of Islam Jewish communities flourished in the Arabian peninsula.

But it should never be forgotten that the

earnest hope of the people of Israel was not to convert the whole world to Judaism but to convert the whole world to God.

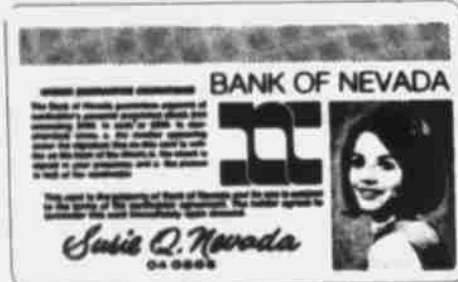
Nor can the ad writers, the new "Jesus Freaks" and above all, those who seek Jewish converts for Christianity by dignified, prayerful means be long oblivious to pertinent facts of recent history. Christian missionaries in African and Asian countries have found it difficult to answer hard questions about 19th and early 20th century Christian handling of the race issue. Essentially a western faith, Christianity---especially white Christianity--- hits rough going in the eastern world.

Replying to a dignified and gentle appeal from a well-placed churchman seeking Jewish converts a few years ago, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg warned that Christian silence, with notable exception in the Nazi era, made all such efforts perilous: "An aggressive Christian mission to Jewry can only break the scar tissue of these wounds and re-arouse the embittered passions of yesterday and today."

And other notes of warning merit recollection: It was Paul Tillich who concluded that Christian proselytism among Jews is wrong because Judaism as a present religious reality is a theological necessity for Christians. To which Reinhold Niebuhr added the observation that Jews may find God more easily in terms of their own religious heritage than through Christianity "in which a Jew always risks a sense of guilt at having allied himself with an oppressive majority culture."

NEW YORK -- Israel Defense Minister Moshe Dayan's recent divorce is not likely to affect his political future, the conclusion of a large majority of a recent sampling of Israeli public opinion, reported by American Jewish Committee.

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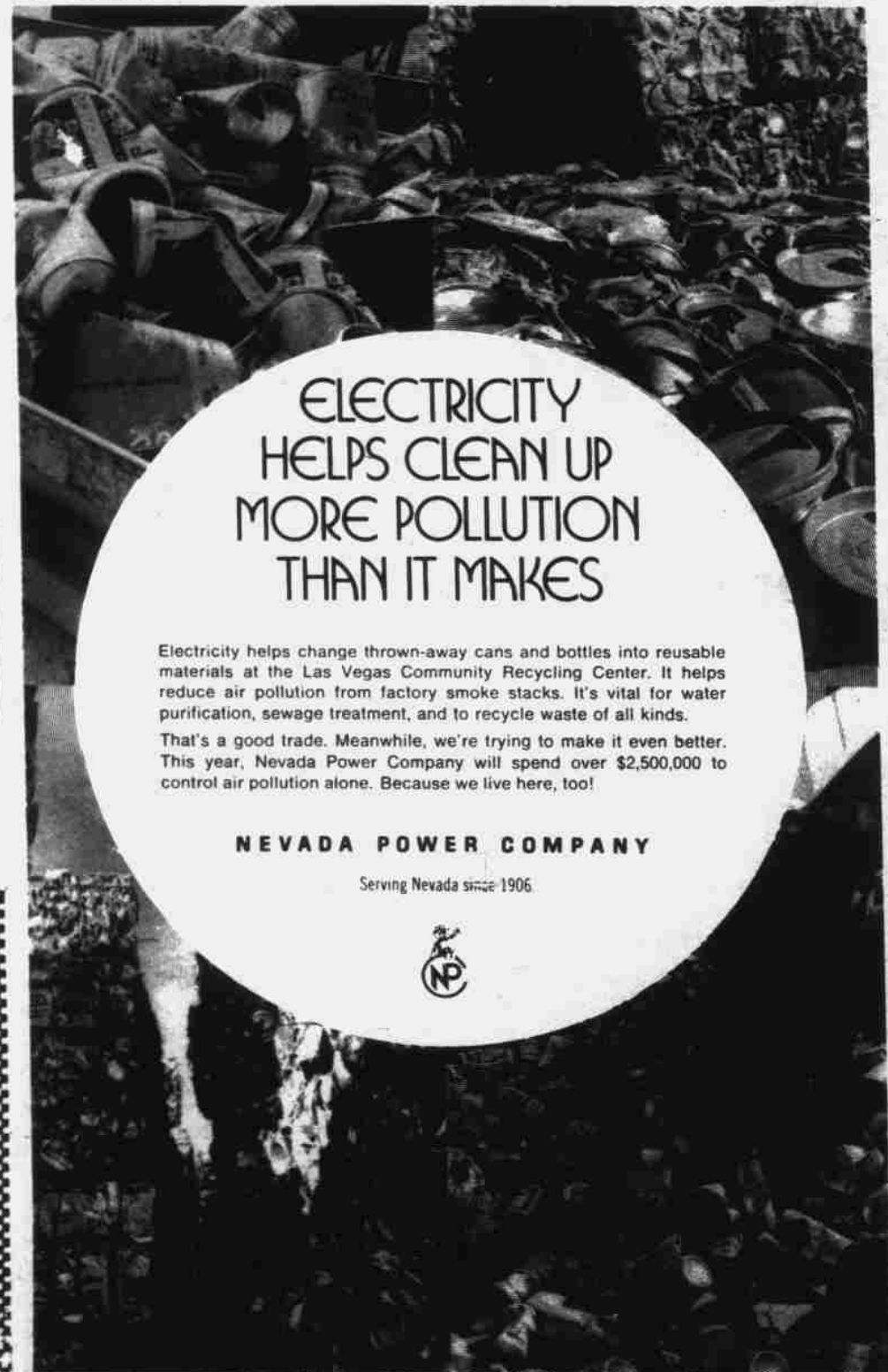
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