



# From Quaker to Jew

## *The Story of Warder Cresson, an American Ger*

*On his 160th Yahrtzeit, 21 Cheshvan 5621*

*by RABBI MENACHEM LEVINE*



***Jewish history is replete with famous converts. Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu; the Navi Ovadiah; Onkelos, the famous Biblical commentator and a nephew of Emperor Titus Hadrian. Rabi Akiva and his disciple Rabi Meir were both descended from geirim, as were the leading Talmudic Sages Shemayah and Avtalyon. Even Dovid Hamelech traced his lineage to Rus, the giyores whose story is prominently read on Shavuos.***

***One of the most important and fascinating converts in recent history is Warder Cresson, whose 160th yahrtzeit is this month. He was a modern-day Yisro who began his journey searching for truth. He eventually converted to Judaism and in subsequent years devoted himself to bettering the lot of the Jewish people, particularly those in Eretz Yisrael. The geirus of Warder Cresson to Judaism also had wide-ranging implications for Jews in America and brought the issue of religious freedom up for debate in the upper echelons of the justice system.***

***Additionally, his ideas impacted national movements, eventually leading to changes for the Jewish people's social and economic conditions in settling the Land of Israel.***

### **Early Years**

Warder Cresson was born to a prominent Quaker family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 13, 1798. Warder's family members were successful artisans and entrepreneurs who owned prime real estate on Chestnut Street in the center of Philadelphia as well as farmland in the surrounding countryside. When he was 17, Warder went to work on the family farms. Within a few years, he became the head of a very successful farming enterprise.

Yet Warder had interests beyond agriculture and finances. In 1827, he began to publicly question some of the fundamental tenets of Quakerism, and he did so in writing. In his first religious tract, "A Humble and Affectionate Address to the Select Members of the Abington Quarterly Meeting," he criticized the religious leaders of his day while showing both his knowledge of Scriptures and his grasp of the social issues of his time.

In 1830, he published a pamphlet entitled "Babylon the Great Is Falling! The Morning Star, or Light from on High." In it, he bemoaned the extravagance and misdeeds of those around him and exhorted all Quakers to lead better and more focused lives.

Around this time, he went through a period of strong religious upheaval. He left Quakerism and subsequently joined various different sects, each

appearing to him to represent true religion until he found it lacking.

### Connecting to Judaism

Providentially, Cresson found his way to Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia's leading Jewish congregation. He came in 1840, at which time he received a surprisingly warm welcome from the influential Orthodox scholar, Chazzan Isaac Leeser. Chazzan Leeser discussed a broad range of topics with Cresson and taught him the Jewish interpretations of *pesukim* in the Torah and Judaism's description of Moshiach. Through Chazzan Leeser, Cresson also began reading the writings of Mordecai Manuel Noah, a Jewish political leader and author who vocally pushed the American government to commit to supporting the reestablishment of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East, feeling that this alone would solve the issue of anti-Semitism. Noah's writings began to influence Cresson's views on the Land of Israel and would continue to impact him in the coming years.

An additional fact that encouraged Cresson's interest in Palestine was that during the 19th century, there were many Christian Americans who turned their focus toward the Holy Land.



Isaac Leeser's English translation of Sephardic prayers used at Mikveh Israel Synagogue in Philadelphia.

### First American Consul to Jerusalem

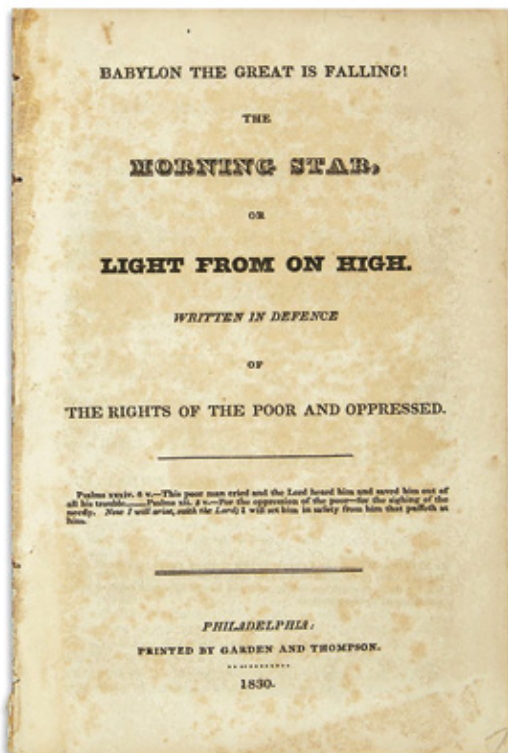
Cresson used his influence to persuade a Philadelphia congressman named Edward Joy Morris to suggest he be appointed America's first consul to Jerusalem. There had never yet been a consul to Jerusalem, because at that time the city had barely 15,000 people living there! Yet its renown as the Holy City and the fact that the American pilgrims and missionaries who visited would benefit from a diplomatic outpost led Morris to contact Secretary of State John C. Calhoun and ask for Cresson to be named consul. He also made it clear that Cresson intended to work at no cost to the government, relying on his personal fortune for his needs.

The State Department agreed and the official appointment came through on May 17, 1844. Cresson left his family in America and set sail for Jerusalem. He wrote in his diary at the time of his departure: "In the Spring of 1844, I left everything near and dear to me on earth. I left the wife of my youth and six lovely children (dearer to me than my natural life), and an excellent farm, with everything comfortable around me. I left all these in the pursuit of truth, and for the sake of Truth alone."

Very soon thereafter, complaints and criticisms were heard regarding his appointment. Some felt he was not a trustworthy or fitting diplomat, due to his well-known strong religious views. As a result, Secretary Calhoun rescinded the appointment by writing to Cresson and letting him know in President John Tyler's name that the government had chosen not to establish a consulate in Jerusalem and he was therefore no longer consul.

However, Cresson had already set sail for the Holy Land and was not aware of his change in status. He proudly disembarked with a flourish in Jaffa, holding an American flag in one hand and a symbolic dove in a cage in the other.

With firm belief in his mission, Cresson disregarded the message when he received word from Calhoun that his appointment as consul had been rescinded. He continued to present himself as the



The pamphlet entitled "Babylon the Great Is Falling! The Morning Star, or Light from on High."

American consul in the Holy Land. Neither the Turkish authorities nor the distant American government acted to stop him, and he was therefore free to act as he wished.

Shortly after his arrival, Cresson penned a glowing piece about his new hometown, describing in euphoric terms the ancient but neglected city that most other visitors viewed as dirty and dilapidated. *Jerusalem, the Centre and Joy of the Whole Earth* was then published in Philadelphia and London at Cresson's direction.

## A New Identity

Though it was originally feared that Cresson's missionary motives would stir up trouble for the Jews, he instead declared war on the Christian missions that he believed were exploiting the poor Jews of Jerusalem. Cresson wrote critically of the high salaries paid to the missionaries who lived "in the very best houses, bought most splendid Arabian horses and dressed in the most luxurious and stylish manner." According to Cresson, the missionaries failed to get a single Jew to apostatize.

Much affected by the surroundings of Jerusalem, he became more inclined toward Judaism and assumed the name Michoel C. Boaz Israel. In 1844-1848, he was a frequent contributor to Isaac Leeser's magazine, *The Occident*, in which he criticized the missionary tactics of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. He became particularly close to the Sephardic community in Jerusalem and was a friend of prominent Sephardic *talmidei chachamim*, including the future Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Harav Yaakov Shaul Elyashar.

In 1847, Cresson began writing *The Key of David the True Messiah*, in which he began his journey toward Judaism. Cresson was ready for the final step of his spiritual journey and the most consequential decision of a turbulent life.

He writes, "I remained in Jerusalem in my former faith until the 28th day of March, 1848, when I became fully satisfied that I could never obtain Strength and Rest, but by doing as Ruth did, and saying to her Mother-in-Law, Naomi, 'Entreat me not to leave thee for whither thou goest I will go'... In short, upon the 28th day of March, 1848, I was circumcised, entered the Holy Covenant and became a Jew."

## Halachic Controversy

Although not performing *melachah* on Shabbos is one of the most important *mitzvos* for a Jew, the Talmud tells us that a gentile is actually forbidden from resting on the Shabbos and must perform one of the *melachos* or be liable for a serious prohibition. There is a dispute among the *poskim* whether this applies to a non-Jew who has undergone *bris milah* and is awaiting immersion in a *mikvah* to complete his conversion.

### EXPENSES OF TIME AND MONEY IN GOING FROM PHILADELPHIA TO JERUSALEM.

	Days.	1st. Class.	2d. Class.	
From Philadelphia to London,	11 by steam,	\$100	\$60	Meals included.
From London to Marseilles,	2 and 2 nights,*	20	24	Meals not inc'd.
From Marseilles to Malta,	2½ by steam,	30	25	Meals included.
From Malta to Alexandria and Beyrout,	3½ by steam,	20	24	Meals included.
From Beyrout to Jaffa,	1 and ½ a night by st'm,	1 50	1 50	Meals not inc'd.
From Jaffa to Jerusalem,	1 by horse, or mule,	1 25	1 00	Meals not inc'd.
	21½ days.	\$190 75	\$135 50	

\* By Railroad and Steamer.

Cresson's attempt to attract pilgrims to the Holy Land by detailing the cost of sailing and lodging costs

In 1848, this question was presented to several leading European Rabbanim, including Harav Yaakov Ettliger (1798-1871), the greatest *Gadol* in Germany at the time and author of numerous halachic works including *Aruch Laner* and *Binyan Tzion*. Harav Ettliger discusses this in *Teshuvos Binyan Tzion, Teshuvah* 91:

"Here in Jerusalem, on Tuesday, the twenty-third day of the month of Adar Sheini of the year (5)608, a non-Jew came from Morocco and was circumcised for the sake of *geirus*, and accepted all the mitzvot. On the following Shabbos, he had not fully recovered from the circumcision and thus had not entered the Mikvah (ritual bath to finalize the conversion). A Rabbi was informed that the convert is very careful in his observance of the Shabbos. However, another Rabbi claimed that due to the fact that he did not yet enter the Mikvah he must not observe the Shabbos and must perform one of the prohibited acts. It was late in the day and the convert was told what he must do. Consequently, he violated the Shabbos by writing a few letters. After the Shabbos, when the Rabbis in town heard of the ruling, they disagreed claiming that after circumcision he is considered a Jew and must not violate the Shabbos."

There are some who posit that the non-Jew who converted referred to is Warder Cresson based on the date of the conversion (23 Adar II corresponds to the secular date of March 28, 1848) and other factors.

## Trial for Insanity

Throughout this transition, Cresson had been writing to his wife and children to keep them informed of his spiritual progress — and of his new name, Michoel Boaz Israel ben Avraham. He had no desire to abandon the family that he "loved most dearly above anything else on earth" and felt certain that he could persuade them to share the satisfaction of his new faith and return with him to his mission in Zion.

Sailing back to Philadelphia in September 1848, Cresson received a devastating reception. He was informed that his wife, Elizabeth, had taken sole possession of their property and sold off the family farm as well as Warder's personal effects. She ignored his appeals for a settlement and joined other family members in lodging a formal

charge of “lunacy” against him for his conversion.

Incredibly, Cresson’s conversion to Orthodox Judaism was considered so eccentric and bizarre that his non-Jewish family had him brought up on charges of insanity. A “sheriff’s jury” of six men quickly agreed with their arguments and issued a verdict of insanity, but Cresson, who had never spent a day in an insane asylum, challenged their decision in court.

The resulting trial lasted for almost three years, included more than one hundred witnesses, and became a national sensation. Aside from the obvious attempt by a frustrated and embittered wife to seize what remained of her wandering husband’s wealth, the dispute involved the government’s power to stigmatize and punish a citizen’s midlife decision to embrace an ancient faith. Cresson fiercely defended his right to select his own religious path.

Esteemed physicians, theologians, and legal scholars gave testimony on both sides. While no one denied Cresson’s reputation as “a strange bird” (in the words of one correspondent), the leaders of the nation’s small Jewish community testified on his behalf, resisting the notion that conversion to Judaism in any way constituted natural proof of insanity. Cresson’s lawyer, the distinguished Horatio Hubbell Jr., characterized the case as a critical test of the religious liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment. His closing statement ended with a dramatic denunciation of the attempt to discredit an unconventional thinker based on his religious ideas alone. “The only charge left with which to accuse my client,” he thundered, “is that he became a Jew!”

By that time, the newspapers covering the trial had swung in support of Cresson’s cause and they unanimously expressed their euphoria at his vindication. Eventually, Cresson ended up leaving most of his property to his family and returning to Jerusalem in 1852.

### Attempts at an Agricultural Colony in Palestine

Upon his return, Cresson became involved in actively supporting efforts towards the agricultural regeneration of Palestine by the Jewish *Yishuv*. His goal was to reduce the dependency of the Jews on Christian charities in the hopes of making the Jewish *Yishuv* as self-sufficient as possible. He well knew that the Christian institutions were mainly interested in converting the Jews and that poverty could create vulnerability for the Jews.

In the fall of 1852, while Sir Moses Montefiore and American businessman and philanthropist Judah Touro



His matzeivah on the Har Hazeisim

were working along the same lines, Cresson announced his intention of establishing an agricultural colony in Emek Refa’im. In March 1853, he published a column in *The Occident* and sent a circular from Jerusalem soliciting assistance for his projects. However, it appears that he was never able to raise the necessary funds.

### Last Years

Cresson made a new life for himself in Israel living as an Orthodox Sephardi Jew, a prominent leader in the Jewish community. His second

marriage was to a woman named Rachel Moledano and together they had two children, Abigail Ruth and Dovid Ben-Zion. Unfortunately, both of them died young.

On the day of his passing, November 6, 1860, all the places of business in Jerusalem were closed out of respect and the entire Jewish community followed his *aron*. He was buried on Har Hazeisim but without descendants to tend to his gravesite, its location, like memories of the consul’s remarkable role, was lost to history for some five generations. However, in 2013, Cresson’s gravesite was rediscovered and it was once again possible to visit his *kever* and give proper honor to this exceptional individual.

### A Vision Materialized

Herman Melville (1819-1891), the author of the novel *Moby Dick*, at one point in his life “looked to Palestine as the source of human experience and possible hope for the future.” He went so far as to borrow money to travel to Palestine and see it for himself. In January 1856, he and Cresson met in Palestine and Cresson shared his views with him. Yet what Melville had seen in Palestine shattered his illusions that it was the country of the future.

Whereas Melville could not believe that Jews would ever return to Eretz Yisrael and turn it into a country where agricultural endeavors thrived, Cresson was convinced that this would happen. Today, 160 years since his passing, the vision of Warder Cresson has been proven correct. The thriving homeland of the Jewish people, the ability to convert to Judaism without challenges of insanity and the tale of a person who sacrificed so much to live a life of truth, can continue to inspire us.

May our inspiration be an *aliyah* for the *neshamah* of Michael Boaz Israel ben Avraham. ■

*Rabbi Menachem Levine is the CEO of JDBY-YTT, the largest Jewish school in the Midwest. He served as Rabbi of Congregation Am Eched in San Jose, CA from 2007 – 2020. He is a popular speaker and has written for numerous publications.*