Benjamin Disraeli--Englishman and Jew

View PDF

Dr. Maurice Wohlgelernter taught as Professor of English first at Yeshiva College, and thereafter at Baruch College, CUNY. He also served as Visiting Professor at New York University, New York Institute of Technology,, City College and Bar Ilan University. He was simultaneously active, during those years, as a practicing rabbi. This article, which appeared in issue 7 of Conversations--the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals--was dedicated to the memory of Dr. Bernard Lander, Founder and President of Touro College. Dr. Wohlgelernter passed away in June 2013.

I always believed in Dizzy, that old Jew. He saw into the future.
Winston Churchill

(A review essay by Dr. Maurice Wohlgelernter, on Benjamin Disraeli, by Adam Kirsch. New York: Schocken, 2008.)

That "old Jew" actually saw into the future, as Churchill understood it, may be true. But, that for some forty years, during the first half of the nineteenth century, Benjamin Disraeli proved to be the most prominent Jew in England is beyond doubt. That no Englishman of that age could ever approach him, it was said everywhere, and was equally true, even if the Englishman was unaware that he was in the presence of a "foreigner." Perhaps, that is why the same Churchill was motivated to pronounce further, on another occasion, that Disraeli, "who never fully assimilated to the English way of life, remained a permanent ‘immigrant' in the country of his birth." Small wonder that after Disraeli became one of the leading English - indeed European -- political figures of the nineteenth century majestically involved in his country's destiny, still answered "Who are you?" with "I am an Englishman." Englishman though he may have been, he was viewed nevertheless as "both emancipated and ghettoized."

Perhaps for that reason, among others, we find that some 130 years after Disraeli's passing in 1881, historians, biographers, philosophers, academicians, and secularists have, in the last two decades or so, published fifteen or so books, monographs, and essays, all analyzing the life, times, works, and accomplishments of Disraeli, that "old Jew." The most recent among these works, one notes admiringly, is a new and fascinating brief study by Adam Kirsch, poet and senior editor of The New Republic, entitled Benjamin Disraeli, all part of a series of studies, already published by Schocken Books, devoted to the promotion of Jewish history, culture, and ideas.

The Disraeli family tradition began in England with the arrival of the first Benjamin, aged eighteen in 1748, bearing the nomenclature D''Israeli,' a name commonly bestowed on Jews of Arab-speaking Middle Eastern countries. On arrival young Benjamin changed the name to D_israel, with a small i, bearing a coat-of-arms with the Latin motto Forti est nihile difficile, to embellish his ancestry, a common practice of that time. So brilliantly successful did Benjamin become that he left behind a most handsome financial legacy, ensuring that neither his son Isaac, nor his grandson Benjamin, would ever have to work for a living. Isaac, therefore, devoted his luxurious life to reading and writing. At age twenty-five, that "bookworm" published a bestseller, Curiosities of Literature, as well as a volume of essays entitled Literary Forgeries. In fact, he gained a respected reputation among the literati of his time, winning especially the admiration of one of England's leading poets of the nineteenth century, Lord Byron.

Of some passing interest, also, is the fact that many Englishmen found it difficult, for example, to pronounce D'Israeli as one word, often separating them into two, as in

D-Israeli, resulting inevitably in the fact that Benjamin was often called "Dizzy," which the grandson himself eventually changed to "Disraeli," as in one word.

"Name change," we know, often results in "faith change." And so it was that Isaac, an "emancipated Jew," ultimately bequeathed to his son, the young Benjamin, an ambivalent attitude toward Judaism. Isaac admired, among others, one of the prophets of the Enlightenment, Moses Mendelsohn, as well as the "rationalism" of Voltaire, resulting, naturally, in a gradual withdrawal from the traditional faith of Judaism - its laws, customs, and traditions. Witness, for example, the vitriolic exchange between Isaac and the Elders of London's most famous Orthodox house of worship in all of England - the Bevis Marks Congregation. Elected to serve as one of its prestigious Elders, Isaac refused that

eminent post. Some four years later, when again elected for that honor, Isaac once more refused, ultimately resigning from the congregation altogether. He eventually manifested ambivalence toward traditional Judaism in his life and home.
Not surprisingly, therefore, that Isaac, writing to a friend, would comment: "Religion drained Jews of their genius . . . . Ten centuries have not produced ten great men . . . . To hate the Talmud is not to hate Judaism but to hate obscurantism; it is a complete system of barbarous learning for the Jews." And then in a wild exhortation to the members of his own people, Isaac states further: "I would implore the Jews to begin to educate their youth as the youth of Europe and not Palestine; let their Talmud be removed to an elevated shelf to be consulted as a curiosity of antiquity and not as a manner of education."

ARRIVAL

Into that home, baby Benjamin arrived on December 21, 1804. On the eighth day day after his arrival, Isaac had him circumcised according to Biblical and Talmudic law and custom. Anyone aware of Isaac's decided hostility of any traditional practices must surely have wondered at this "pious" decision. After all, Isaac was certainly aware, better than many, that Jews of every age, because of their deep devotion to such practices, evoked universal mockery for their insistence on remaining a "peculiar people." Nevertheless, Isaac in this instance ruled in favor of his "past."

But not, alas, for very long. A mere thirteen years later, as Benjamin was approaching his bar mitzvah, Isaac decided - in that summer of 1817 - to have this youngster and his siblings - Sarah, an older sister, and his two younger brothers Ralph and James - converted at the altar of the Church of England. To anyone acquainted with Isaac's negative views of Judaic law and practice, the decision could not have been a shock. In later years, the irony of this conversion, forcing Benjamin to omit celebration of his "Jewish manhood," never left him.

On the contrary, as Mr. Kirsch reminds us, Disraeli, as he aged, developed his own views of his newly adopted faith. "Christianity," he argued repeatedly, "is really the fulfillment of Judaism." In other words, both faiths are really one: "Each religion," therefore, "should acknowledge its dependence on the other . . . . Christianity is completed Judaism, or it is nothing . . . just as Judaism as incomplete without Christianity." To sum up that unusual viewpoint, Disraeli invented a bewildering aphorism, repeating it often, that "he" was "really the blank page between the Old Testament and the New." All of which made it much easier for him to maintain a public image of "remaining a Jew while

simultaneously enjoying the legal rights of a member of the Church of England." So that "Christianity," Disraeli argued further, "far from representing a betrayal of Judaism was actually an expression of his Jewish pride."

The year 1817 brought a number of other changes in Disraeli's life. Isaac moved the family to a larger residence in Bloomsbury, near the British Museum, the family home for the next twelve years. Young Benjamin attended Higham Hall, "an obscure school of some fifty students, run by a Unitarian minister." He received a good but not a superior education, "leaving the Hall after only three years." Needless to say, Disraeli never attended Oxford or Cambridge, perhaps because "ever since his youthful days, he always detested school." Or, as Disraeli recalls in his novel Vivian Grey (1826), Vivian's mother, much like his own, was "one of those women whom nothing in the world could persuade that the public school is anything but a place where boys were roasted alive." And in such schools, Vivian repeatedly hears the word "stranger," a euphemism, we know, for "Jew," leading constantly to fistfights. On Easter Sunday, for instance, boys would actually rush out of chapel after school, shouting: "He is risen, He is risen/All Jews must go to prison." This form of prejudice was passed down by generations of students, like nursery rhymes, evoking Disraeli's intense anger. As he aged, Disraeli learned "to lock that anger with rigid self-control, deliberately managing an air of innocent detachment." How sad that Disraeli actually heard variations of those remarks for the rest of his life, especially in politics.

To enter that world of politics and the "power" he always dreamed of attaining, Disraeli modeled his own image and lifestyle on that of Byron, the English Romantic poet, "by imitating his flamboyant dress, exquisite appearance which, combined with his precocious genius and sharp wit, helped pave his way into London's society." And like Byron, Disraeli was attractive to women, especially older ones, "having affairs with many of them, in a society where politics and adultery were overlapping pastimes." That interest in "older women," some believe, may have resulted from the greater attention Disraeli's own mother paid to his siblings than to him. In any event, Disraeli also describes some of those "escapes" in Vivian Grey, where the title character, "with his charming arrogance, vaulting ambitions without any scruples or political principles, pretended to care about people he means to exploit. One must mix with the herd: enter their feelings, humor, their weaknesses, sympathize with their sorrows, and will do anything to get ahead."

Though Disraeli eventually "got ahead," in an outstanding way, he remained an outsider, and all because of his "Jewishness," or that "irreducible otherness" which

made it impossible for him to close the gap.
And yet, despite Disraeli's lingering "Jewishness," we must remember that it always remained privately operative. A fantasy, really. For we need recall that in the 1830s, already a member of Parliament, Disraeli took a trip to the Middle East, visiting Jerusalem, which he enjoyed. Yet, on his return, his description of that city was, by all accounts, "most disappointing," perhaps because that city figured in one of his "fantasies as a future metropolis of England," thus fulfilling his abiding desire for power, which more than his fiction remained central to his life. And England, not Israel, would be the Israel of his imagination, making himself his own "Messiah."

If further proof were ever necessary that his "lingering Jewishness was privately operative," one need but remember the famous "Damascus Affair," which occurred some ten years after his return from Jerusalem. A "blood libel" resurfaced in Damascus in February 1840, when the murder of a Catholic priest was blamed on a Jewish barber, resulting in a reign of terror and the torture of the city's leading Jews, some of whom were actually killed. Moses Montefiore, a prominent Jewish Englishman, organized a movement to halt those killings. As a fellow member of the House of Commons, he turned to Disraeli to join him in a protest, with the goal of forcing the Egyptian government of Muhammad Ali to put an end to this affair. Disraeli refused, proving that his "psychologically powerful Jewishness" did not include sensitivity to the existence of his fellow Jews struggling to survive. He sadly elevated the "fantasy of Jewishness over political reality."

That political reality all found its way, like all else Disraeli thought or fashioned into his fiction, which he used as character studies of some of England's national figures, as well as his own. Mr. Kirsch is not the first to recognize the literary and historical significance of Disraeli's writing. Even three years before Disraeli's death the eminent Danish critic Georg Brandes, author of the classic multivolume Main Currents of Literature in the Nineteenth Century, confirmed that truth in 1878 in his Lord Beaconsfield: A Study.
Consider, for example, Disraeli's novel Contirari Fleming, wherein the title character proclaims that it is "better to be a man of action than a man of letters." Nor would Contirari even consider "literature more than a substitute for politics." And however exceptional the wide range of Disraeli's fiction, it was still - and always - "politics that fascinated him most." And Contirari's Venetian ancestry also "becomes not only part of his ancestry" but it also, as Mr. Kirsch contends, "enables Disraeli to turn his alienation into a source of pride . . . . For it is the historical grandeur of Venice and his Venetian ancestors that emboldens Contirari

to succeed in politics and poetry, to become his people's savior. It was Disraeli's "own wish that one day, he, too, would serve as England's savior and be the one to rebuild a Jewish homeland in Palestine by restoring Jews to their Promised Land."

Under somewhat similar circumstance, Alroy, the central character in Disraeli's novel of the same name, dreams that he, too, might one day rebuild Jerusalem, restoring its Jewishness and historical dignity. But then Disraeli, remembering his own life as a convert, describes Alroy's hope as follows: "the only liberation the Jew needs is a liberation from Judaism, with all its outmoded taboos and social disadvantages." For Disraeli, a baptized Christian, who made his way into gentile society, self-deliverance was far more practical than Alroy's dreams. All of which leaves Disraeli no choice, except in his fiction, to conclude that England, not Israel, as already noted, "would become the Israel of his imagination, making himself his very own Messiah."

Of this one may be reasonably certain, that in the most critical period of Disraeli's life, the private "Messiah" turned into an "historical and practical one."

POLITICS

After four attempts to gain a seat in the House of Commons, Disraeli finally won one in July 1837, the year Queen Victoria ascended the British throne. But to maintain that seat, he first needed to cleanse his disreputable past. Since he was known, heretofore, in many circles as a "dandy, an adulterer, an eccentric genius, and, of course, a Jew," change was definitely in order.

Disraeli, seeking more stability and a better reputation, fell in love with Mary Anne Lewis, widow of the wealthy Wyndham Lewis, a colleague and fellow Parliamentarian. In keeping with Disraeli's pattern, she was some twelve years older than he. She predicted, interestingly, that in a few years, Disraeli would become "one of the great men of his day," a prediction that came true. That marriage lasted thirty-four years. However strangely, Disraeli never planned to have a family, in part, because he would have been forced to decide, as Mr. Kirsch puts it, "whether he wanted them to be English with Jewish ancestors, or Jews who happened to make their own sphere of action." Before Mary Anne died in 1872, she told a friend that her life had been a "long scene of happiness owing to his love and kindness."

Cleansed socially and financially, Disraeli entered the world of English politics with his first speech in Parliament, on December 7, 1837, to become eventually

the most brilliant orator in the House, admired by some colleagues and, simultaneously, envied by many others. He tried always to make an impression by a show of personal independence instead of blind Tory party loyalty. Thus, Sir Robert Peel, on becoming Prime Minister a few years later, would never even think, because of his dislike and envy of Disraeli, to appoint him to the cabinet. All of which moved Disraeli to become a member of a group of elected officials known as "Young England," thus giving the party a newly "romanticized sense of itself; which allowed more Englishmen to see the need for reform." And all sorts of reform became necessary because of the Industrial Revolution, during which "countless thousands of English laborers moved from their farms to the burgeoning manufacturing cities."

So that Disraeli began to question, "What shall we now conserve as Tories?" He argued that "it was necessary to maintain strong links between the past and future." Besides, he argued further, reform was needed, lest the growth of the urban labor force would lead to a revolution as occurred in France. "Any lack of involvement in social reform would lead the public to believe that the Tory party was unimaginative and ruthless."

Disraeli's conservatism was "neither unimaginative nor heartless," but based rather on the principle that "power has only one duty: to secure the social welfare of the public." Suffering dare not be ignored. In other words, "the haves and have nots must be bridged." To improve England's political future, therefore, would not be the "dispossessing of the rich or enfranchising the poor; instead, it would mean the empowering the rich and teaching the poor to trust their betters." The reconciliation of the nobility and the working class, Disraeli believed, "was the core of what should become politically operative in England."

Subsequently, Disraeli and Peel found themselves in conflict over the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1845. Peel wanted to cancel them; Disraeli to keep them. Briefly, these laws regulated the import of all sorts of grains: "wheat, barley, rye, and corn," which were originally enacted to protected English farmers from cheap foreign grains flooding their markets, forcing them to lower prices they charged for their own crops. Favoring free trade, business opposed the Corn Laws, while workers also opposed them in the name of free trade. Disraeli favored them. Peel, meanwhile, disavowed the principles of his own party, eventually consorting with the Whigs, who also favored their repeal. As a result, Disraeli demanded on March 17, 1846, that Peel call a new election. By the middle of that year, Peel's credibility had been destroyed mainly by Disraeli, forcing the Prime Minister to leave the party. Disraeli and his associate Lord George Bentink now commanded

the House.

The weakness of Peel and his predecessors resulted in the strange political reality that in the three decades from 1846 to 1876 there was only one conservative administration in England - and that for only eighteen months. This meant, among other things, that Disraeli spent more time in opposition than any other British political figure. How interesting, therefore, that Disraeli's attacks on Peel during the debate on the Corn Laws forced Peel to connive with the Whigs to repeal them. Disraeli was moved to argue forcefully: "Above all, maintain the law of demarcation between parties, for it is only by maintaining the independence of the party that you can maintain the integrity of public men and the power and influence of Parliament itself." Peel, embarrassed, left the party with most of his Peelites following him. The party fell while Disraeli ascended, together with his associates.

In February 1867, at the age of sixty-three, Disraeli finally became leader of his party, moving him to declare: "Yes, I have climbed to the top of the greasy pole." While in power, however briefly at first, Disraeli was able to introduce the famous Reform Bill, of August 1867, which enabled almost a million Englishmen to gain the right to vote. That classic bill moved Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb, the City University of New York historian, to comment: "The Reform Act of 1867 was one of the decisive events - perhaps the decisive event in modern English history. For it was this act that transformed England into a democracy." Disraeli, of course, deserved most of the credit: "Here's to the man who rode the race, who took the time, who kept the time, who did the trick."

In response to this Herculean accomplishment, the Marquis of Salisbury, in common with others who resented Disraeli's political success, offered only the following bitterly prejudiced remark: "Disraeli is an adventurer without principles and honesty. A political feat that might have been applauded in a natural-born Tory, but deeply suspect in a Jew, who, by definition, could be nothing more than an adventurer." The sensitive reader will conclude that any attack on Disraeli turned, in the hands of his enemies, and at times even friends, into an attack mainly on his Jewishness as though his "objectionable actions were always traceable to his race."

Soon after Disraeli's Reform triumph, Lord Derby, the Prime Minister, was forced, because of his declining health, to resign his office; Disraeli, as leader of his party, went to Queen Victoria to be appointed formally to succeed him. Though the Queen, at first, found Disraeli somewhat reviling, he eventually became the leading defender of the crown or monarchy. That devotion to the monarch, as Mr.

Kirsch emphasizes, rested on two basic sources: first, "his political philosophy which glorified the crown as the tribune of the people;" and, second, his "poetic imagination" which allowed him to see prosaic Queen Victoria as a monarch out of chivalric romance; and whose proud destiny will, in his eyes, "bear relief to suffering millions." Besides, Disraeli never lost a sense of awe that a middle class Jew should be the close associate of an English monarch, ‘sending her letters constantly filled with political news and social gossip to amuse her, something on her own she never received in her life." It so happens that the death of Prince Albert, her husband, in 1861, allowed Disraeli to gain her fullest confidence and her particular praise that he "always spoke from the heart."

Evidence of the close relationship between Disraeli and the Queen may be further confirmed by the following brief but touching exchange between them, on his retirement after six years in office: "His relation with Your Majesty were the chief, he might almost say, his only happiness and interest in this world." To which she replied with equal sincerity by taking the extraordinary step of writing to him in the first person: "When we correspond - which I hope we shall on many a private subject and with anyone living astonished or offended . . . I hope it will be in this more easy form." To which Mr. Kirsch, probably smiling, adds: "They almost sound like parting lovers."

And all despite the fact that Disraeli once confided to Matthew Arnold, the English critic and luminary: "Everyone likes flattery, and when you come to royalty, you should lay it on with a trowel." Yet, his fervent relationship with Her Majesty was, as he records, his only happiness and interest in this world; acting always as her champion had been one of the most gratifying of Disraeli's experiences. So gratifying, in fact, that because of her admiration of his loyalty and devotion, he was the only Prime Minister ever allowed to sit when he visited her royal residence. Hence, on August 11, 1878, after Disraeli delivered his last speech in the House of Commons as Prime Minister, the Queen, a day later, crowned him with the title "Earl of Beaconsfield," a name of a village not far from his residence in Hughenden. She even visited the new lord for dinner, evoking, sadly, another egregious comment from another bitter critic: "The Queen was going ostentatiously to eat with Disraeli in his ghetto." It was the type of remark that Disraeli, from experience, would generally expect and take in stride, as he often did with similar remarks from other friends and enemies, throughout his career. He would, nevertheless, carry on with his life and work, and "continue to embrace reform while simultaneously making conservatism a constructive political force." And of the future of conservatism, he argued constantly, "depended on improving the living standard of the poor, and to remedy the evils of the Industrial

Revolution."

However powerful Disraeli may have become while assuming the leadership of his victorious party and Parliament, he was not immune to personal tragedy. As mentioned previously, Mary Anne, his wife of thirty-four years, died of cancer in 1872, at age eighty. But as Mr. Kirsch reminds us, "with no children and no truly intimate friends, her death left him profoundly alone, and his future political triumphs would be shadowed by that loneliness." But not for long, however. For, after corresponding with Selina, the Countess of Bradford, and Anne, the Countess of Chesterfield, to both of whom he wrote some 1600 letters, he chose the former to be his new wife.

Since Disraeli's real passion was foreign policy and playing a role on the international stage, he pursued that interest vigorously. Hence, when Russia declared war on, and defeated, Turkey, Disraeli warned her as Prime Minister not to move on Constantinople, ordering British troops from India to the Mediterranean to enforce his wishes. That brinkmanship stopped Russia from crossing the Dardanelles, thus avoiding war. Not surprisingly, at the famous Congress of Berlin in June 1878, attended by all the leading statesmen of Europe, Disraeli was the star of that gathering. No other statesman deserved greater credit for stopping the Russians. That, among other things, also resulted in Turkey's acceding to Disraeli's desire that England secure ownership of the island of Cyprus as a base for resisting any future Russian aggression. By stopping Russia Disraeli expanded the borders of the British Empire single-handedly. Small wonder that Bismarck would be moved to comment in Berlin, admiringly: "Der alter Jude, das ist der Mann [That old Jew, he is the man]." And he was.

Disraeli also loved the East. When informed that Khedive's Egypt was bankrupt, Disraeli was able to secure a financial interest in the Suez Canal Company, by purchasing, with the help of a four billion pound loan from Edmond Rothschild, a minority share in the company, with the rest remaining in French hands. Though his coup was mostly symbolic, Disraeli wanted it "as part of his grand design to increase English power in the East."

One is moved, therefore, to sum up Disraeli's political career, as does Mr. Kirsch, moving from being a Prime Minister, which is a political reality, to that of a "statesman," eventually becoming the greatest Parliamentarian of his, and perhaps of all, time, while mostly in opposition, as well as becoming an incredibly powerful debater.

Disraeli, like Churchill, and earlier, the Duke of Marlborough, who as writers "understood their country poetically as well as politically," made England become for Disraeli the "Israel of his imagination."

DEPARTURE

Reviewing Disraeli's rise from a "back bencher" in the House of Commons to England's Prime Minister, a confidant of Queen Victoria, and an international statesman, one dare never forget that he was, throughout his life, very conscious of being a Jew. That he was well aware of his roots, more often than all the reminders hurled his way by both his political and social opponents, is no less true. Consider, for example, one of the less heralded events of his life: the publication of Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859, with which he disagreed publicly, arguing that "man is born to believe. Depriving him of his basic beliefs would leave him dangerously demoralized." The question, as Disraeli formulated it, ran simply thus: "Is man an ape or an angel? My Lord, I am on the side of the angels." And even in politics, Disraeli often appeared on the side of the angels. For in his novel Tancred, he writes: "There can be no political freedom which is not founded on Divine Authority; otherwise, it can be at best but a specious fathom of license, inevitably terminating in anarchy."

Furthermore, there occurred an incident in his life which, for this reader at least, seemed to establish permanently that inner confirmation of his Jewishness. In 1849, desperately in need of cash, Disraeli decided to sell his father's 25,000-volume library to London's Sotheby's. But not before choosing for himself the various Jewish works, which he transferred to his own estate in Hughenden. A mere glance at these titles could easily evoke wonder and awe, if that were ever really needed, that he could not divest himself of his "Jewishness" as he understood it. The titles of these works alone are both surprising and convincing: History of the Jews in Spain, France, Italy, and England; various works on the Inquisition; editions of the Song of Songs and the Book of Joel; Protection of the Jews of Palestine; Travels of R. Benjamin Metudela; Defense of the Old Testament; Memoirs of Moses Mendelsohn; The Traditions of Jews; A Succinct Account of the Rules and Covenants of the Jews. The decision to hold these volumes back helps prove his abiding interest in the knowledge, if not necessarily his personal practice, of Judaism. So that when in his own works we find Disraeli announcing that "Christianity was only a completed Judaism . . . was more a political than a theological stance." That "theological stance" might very well have motivated Disraeli to include almost an entire chapter six, in his novel Trancred, a rather lengthy exposition of the Jewish festival Feast of Tabernacles, known everywhere

by its Hebrew name of Succoth. There Disraeli describes the arrival of the Emir and his family to visit the Tancred household during that eight-day holiday. The Emir recognizes, at once, that Tancred is "civilized and fashionable," and his "household is of a race that persists in celebrating their Hebrew homage; and of a race whose graceful rites that are, at least, homage to a benignant nature." And that every child in Israel, in a "dingy suburb of some bleak northern town, happily celebrates the vintage of purple Palestine . . . and that he must dwell for seven days in a bower, and must build it in the boughs of his thick trees; and those trees are the myrtle and the weeping willows . . . . His mercantile connections will enable him, at considerable cost, to procure some palm leaves from Canaan, which he may wave in his synagogue, while he proclaims Hosannah, the highest . . . .

"After services at his synagogue, he sups late with his wife and his children in the open air, as if he were in the peasant villages of Galilees, beneath its sweet starry sky . . . . Perhaps, as he is giving the Keedush, the Hebrew blessing to the Hebrew meal, breaking and distributing the bread, sanctifying it with a preliminary prayer the goblet of wine he holds . . . offering a peculiar thanksgiving to the Feast of Tabernacles."

The reader begins to wonder: having paid homage to the faith his father denied him, was Disraeli really still the intellectual mercenary and hypocrite his enemies depicted him? Or was he permanently "disoriented" from the lack of a genuine bar mitzvah celebration and upbringing? Or was it all the result of the most tragic element of his career, that, at the height of his powers, and even among his closest allies, he remained an "outsider?" Or, was it simply his native Jewishness, that "irreducible otherness" that made it impossible for him to close the gap? There came a moment, however, during the very final minutes of his life, when Disraeli ultimately acknowledged his "irreducible otherness."

Suffering critically from a bronchial condition, Disraeli was hospitalized. After being confined for some time, Disraeli was uncomfortable and unhappy in those particular medical surroundings. Lord Kidd and some other friends succeeded in sneaking him out of the hospital during the night and brought him home. Soon after Disraeli's return home, Lord Cairns, another friend, suggested that Kidd summon Canon Fleming, of the local church, to visit their sick friend, for possible last rites. Disraeli objected, arguing that he wanted no clergyman present, nor, for that matter, any discussion of Christianity and Redemption. Instead, holding Kidd's hand, Disraeli whispered the following with his last breath: "There is one God . . . . of Israel," his English equivalent of the major verse in all of Judaism, "Shema Yisroel: Hear O Israel, God is our God, God is One." According to Jewish Law as recorded by Maimonides, at the beginning of the second chapter of The

Laws of Repentance, that verse made Disraeli an immediate penitent: "Even after spending a lifetime of sin, if one repents on the very last day of his life, all his sins are forgiven." As he breathed his last, Disraeli, that "old Jew," went to meet his Maker, as the "new Jew."