Sir Moses Montefiore's Life and Times

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Sir Moses Montefiore Bart. was the most famous English Jew of his time, probably of all time. Passionate in his beliefs, both as a Jew and as an Englishman, he became a legend throughout the entire Jewish world in his own lifetime. He was respected by kings and potentates; and was venerated by impoverished Jews in the shtetls of Eastern Europe as well as in the mellahs of North Africa and the Middle East.

He was born in 1784 and died in 1885, aged 100. As a young man, his uncle Moses Mocatta secured him a position as one of the only twelve brokers allowed to practise on the London Exchange. He married Judith Cohen, sister-in-law of Nathan Meyer Rothschild; and that connection helped him to make his fortune before the age of forty. Montefiore then retired from the Stock Exchange in order to devote the rest of his long life to the interests of poor and oppressed fellow Jews.

Sir Moses, who continued to sign cheques for charitable causes on his deathbed, came from an Italian Sephardi family. Married to an Ashkenazi wife, he was so firm a believer in the unity of the Jewish people that he endowed each couple who married in his synagogue with a gift of money – which sum was doubled for a “mixed marriage” between a Sephardi and an Ashkenazi.

His charities and benevolent foundations at home were on a large scale; and in visits to Palestine, Morocco, Rome, Russia and Turkey, he did what he could to relieve the persecution of Jews in those places. He was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1837 for these noble services; and was made a Baronet in 1846.

Sir Moses Montefiore's love of Zion was demonstrated by his seven visits to the Holy Land, undertaken at a time when such journeys were difficult and dangerous: his first visit, during which he was able to spend only four days in Jerusalem, took ten months to complete. Sir Moses actively encouraged agriculture there and endowed hospitals and almshouses. The Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation of London still distributes funds bequeathed by Sir Moses for *necessitous scholars in Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed and Tiberias*.

The most famous of the many journeys Montefiore made abroad was that connected with the Damascus Affair. The pernicious slander that the Jews require the blood of a Christian for making their Passover matzah was revived in Damascus in 1840; and that resulted in a fierce persecution of the Jews of that city. Sir Moses, with the active support of Lord Palmerston, visited the Khedive of Egypt, where he refuted the allegations and managed to obtain the release of the imprisoned Jews. He also received a *firman* (royal order) from the Sultan of Turkey, guaranteeing protection to all the Jews in his dominions against similar charges.

On his return to London, Queen Victoria honoured Sir Moses by giving him the privilege of adding supporters (heraldic animals) to his coat of arms. Because of his passionate love of God and of Jerusalem he wrote in his diary:

> The supporters I wish for are to exalt our holy religion by displaying Jerusalem in a more distinguished manner than I could otherwise have done.

He therefore added the Lion of Judah holding a banner bearing the word *Jerusalem* (in Hebrew letters) to his arms.

When in London, Sir Moses Montefiore worshipped at the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Synagogue in Bevis Marks, a congregation to which he was devoted and which he served for many years as President of its Board of Elders; it was natural therefore that he turned to the Elders later in life when when establishing his Endowment. In 1835 he was elected Sheriff of London and Middlesex, only the second Jew to occupy that position; and in 1837 he became President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, a position he held for thirty-nine years.

Men who devote themselves to the help of their fellow men generally do so in one of two ways: they give either of their time or of their money. Sir Moses Montefiore was an outstanding example of a man who was able and willing to give both. That he did to such effect that his name is still remembered and revered by Jews all

over the world today. Wherever in the world Jews were oppressed, there Sir Moses journeyed; and he visited the Khedive of Egypt, the Ottoman Sultan, the Pope, the Sultan of Morocco and the Czar of Russia amongst others in his efforts to alleviate the suffering of his fellow Jews.

In addition to his work for oppressed Jews, Sir Moses also created a centre of Jewish life in Ramsgate, a fashionable seaside resort in the county of Kent. In 1833 Sir Moses opened his own synagogue in Ramsgate, close to his country house. The future Queen Victoria who took holidays in an adjacent house on Ramsgate's East Cliff, was given a golden key to the gate between the two gardens to enable her to enjoy both. His house has long since disappeared; but his synagogue and the adjacent mausoleum in which he and his wife are buried still stand, carefully maintained by the trustees of his Endowment.

It is supposed that Sir Moses had directed that his papers should be destroyed after his death, for many were indeed burned then. A large number, now in the possession of the Montefiore Endowment, were rescued by Dr Louis Loewe, first Principal of the Judith Lady Montefiore College. Others papers were rescued by Rev. Herman Shandel, Hazan of the Ramsgate Synagogue, and passed on to his descendants: these, including letters and two of Lady Montefiore's (unpublished) handwritten diaries, are in the Shandel/Lipson Collection in the library of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish studies. Some papers that survived are also held by members of the Sebag-Montefiore family.