Benjamin Disraeli: An Ongoing Enigma

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Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) was one of the most illustrious and powerful men in 19th century England (and the world), and yet he remains an enigma. Was he a proud Jew? Was he a sincere Christian? Was he a brilliant politician? Was he a buffoon? Was he a great and visionary leader of the British Empire? Was he a party hack who was mostly interested in advancing himself and his loyalists?

The answer to all these questions seems to be: yes, no, perhaps, we are not sure.

Disraeli’s family had been members of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of London. His father, Isaac—for a variety of reasons—decided to have his children baptized and raised as Christians. In July 1817, shortly before Benjamin would have celebrated his Bar Mitzvah, the young boy was brought to church and was baptized.

Now that he was a Christian, he could blend in better with English society, right? In a way yes, but in a way no. He was still identified as a Jew. His very name gave him away. His appearance was described as being “oriental,” not really a pure English Christian. Benjamin dressed flamboyantly and acted accordingly. After completing his studies, he spent a few years with a firm of solicitors in London, and then he tried his hand at journalism. He made some disastrous investments that put him in serious financial trouble. Heavily in debt, he tried to salvage the situation by writing popular novels that would pay him decent royalties.

He turned to politics but lost his first several attempts to get elected to Parliament. At last, in 1837 he won an election and became a member of Parliament. In 1839, he married a prosperous widow (although not as wealthy as he had expected), and went on to live a happy married life with her until her passing in 1872. Benjamin Disraeli was a gifted orator and a very able debater. He came to lead the "Young England Party" in Parliament. He rose to various high positions in government, and became Prime Minister in 1868 for a short spell. He again rose to become Prime Minister in 1874 and served in that position into 1880. He held the title of Earl of Beaconsfield.

Although Disraeli was a Christian, a member of Parliament, a popular author, a confidant of Queen Victoria…his detractors never stopped seeing him as a Jew, an outsider, an interloper. He had to struggle against unceasing political malice and anti-Jewish malevolence. He climbed to the top of the "slippery pole" of political power by dint of his genius, his political prowess, and his ability to outshine all his rivals.

Instead of denying or de-emphasizing his Jewish roots, Disraeli flaunted his Jewishness. His public posture was that Christianity was an outgrowth and broader expression of Judaism. "Everything gentle and sublime in the religious code of the New Testament is a mere transcript from the so-called oral law of the Jews" (Weintraub, p. 453). In his novel, Tancred, one of his Jewish characters taunts the English nobleman by pointing out that "half Christendom worships a Jewess, and the other half a Jew….Which is the superior race, the worshipped or the worshippers?" The Christian world owed the Jews an immense debt.

In his novel, Coningsby, Disraeli idealized a wise man by name of Sidonia. "All of us encounter, at least once in our life, some individual who utters words that make us think forever. There are men whose phrases are oracles; who condense in a sentence the secrets of life; who blurt out an aphorism that forms a character or illustrates an existence. A great thing is a great book; but greater than all is the talk of a great man" (Coningsby, p.149). Sidonia the Jew was such a man, one who had "exhausted all the sources of human knowledge." Sidonia propounded the greatness of the Jews. "And at this moment, in spite of centuries, of tens of centuries, of degradation, the Jewish mind exercises a vast influence on the affairs of Europe. I speak not of their laws, which you still obey; of their literature, with which your minds are saturated; but of the living Hebrew intellect. You never observe a great intellectual movement in Europe in which the Jews do not greatly participate" (p. 271). Sidonia reminds Coningsby that Europe owes the Jews "the best part of its laws, a fine portion of its literature, all its religion" (p.

273).

Anti-Semites never forgave Disraeli’s Jewishness and constantly identified him as a Jew in spite of his conversion to Anglicanism. In response to a vicious anti-Semitic comment made in the British parliament, Disraeli famously retorted: “Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the Right Honourable Gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon.”

Disraeli’s novel, Tancred, originally published in 1847, tells of a young British nobleman who had a spiritual longing to visit the Holy Land. When he arrived, he spent time with a Jewish family and became acquainted with Jewish religious life. His visit coincided with Succoth, and he was told that this is a great national festival celebrating the harvest. He was shown the lulav and etrog, symbols of the autumn harvest. Tancred was deeply impressed.

Disraeli writes: “The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persist in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!”

Disraeli notes that it is easier for “the happier Sephardim, the Hebrews who have never quitted the sunny regions that are laved by the Midland Ocean,” to observe the festival, since they can identify with the climate and setting of the early generations of Israelites who celebrated Succoth. “But picture to yourself the child of Israel in the dingy suburb or the squalid quarter of some bleak northern town, where there is never a sun that can at any rate ripen grapes. Yet he must celebrate the vintage of purple Palestine! The law has told him, though a denizen in an icy clime, that he must dwell for seven days in a bower….”

He continues with a description of the ignominies which Jews suffer in their ghettos in Europe “living amid fogs and filth, never treated with kindness, seldom with justice….Conceive such a being, an object to you of prejudice, dislike, disgust, perhaps hatred. The season arrives, and the mind and heart of that being are filled with images and passions that have been ranked in all ages among the most beautiful and the most genial of human experience; filled with a subject the most vivid, the most graceful, the most joyous, and the most exuberant…the harvest of the grape in the native regions of the vine.”

The downtrodden Jews, in observance of Succoth, find real joy in life. They decorate their Succahs as beautifully as they can; their families gather together to eat festive meals in the Succah. The outside world may be cruel and ugly; but their inner life is joyous and noble. Their external conditions may not seem too happy, but their internal happiness is real. The Jews, while remembering the glories of the Israelite past, also dream of the future glories of the Israelites when their people will be restored to their ancient greatness.

Was Disraeli a Zionist before there was an official Zionist movement? Yes…and no. Like so much about Disraeli, there is ambiguity. On the one hand, he spoke and wrote emotionally about the Jewish attachment to the holy land, and to their ultimate return to Israel. But on the other hand, he did not actively initiate or pursue any policies that would lead to a Jewish return to the land of Israel.

In his novel, Alroy, the Jewish hero states: “You ask me what I wish: my answer is, a national existence, which we have not. You ask me what I wish: my answer is, the Land of Promise. You ask me what I wish: my answer is, Jerusalem. You ask me what I wish: my answer is, the Temple, all we forfeited, all we have yearned after, all for which we have fought, our beauteous country, our holy creed, our simple manners, and our ancient customs.”

One of Disraeli’s political associates, Lord Stanley, wrote in his diary that on one occasion Disraeli spoke to him “with great apparent earnestness on the subject of restoring the Jews to their own land….The country, he said, had ample natural capabilities; all it wanted was labour, and protection for the labourer; the ownership of the soil might be bought from Turkey: money would be forthcoming: the Rothschilds and leading Hebrew capitalists would all help.” These words were spoken a half century before Herzl’s The Jewish State (1897). Yet, Stanley went on to note that Disraeli “never recurred to it again. I have heard of no practical step taken or attempted to be taken by him in the matter” (Kirsch pp.909-91).

Disraeli described himself as the blank page between the Old and New Testaments. He belonged to both Testaments in part, and to neither in full. He was born a Sephardic Jew and remained very proud of his Jewish roots. He was a member of the Anglican Church, and expressed loyalty to its teachings. But in spite of his being baptized as a child, he was still thought of as a Jew. Winston Churchill put it very well: “I always believed in Dizzy, that old Jew. He saw into the future.”

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Benjamin Disraeli's family were members of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of London, a sister Congregation of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York—where I've been associated as rabbi since 1969. The two congregations share the Western Sephardic traditions and religious worldview. When I think of Benjamin Disraeli, I somehow imagine him as one of my own congregants…even though our lives are separated by many decades, and our actual religious commitments are very far apart.

It is difficult for me to be "proud" of Disraeli, since he was, after all, a Jewish apostate who lived his entire adult life as a Christian. Yet, it is also difficult not to be "proud" of him. He was, in spite of his being a Christian, very visible as a Jew, very identified as being a Jew. He spoke with tremendous pride of his Jewish antecedents and believed the Christian world owed an immense debt to Judaism and the Jewish people.

If his father had not had Benjamin baptized, it would have been impossible for him to have risen within the British political system, and he never would have become Prime Minister. His entire success as a statesman was contingent on his being a Christian. Yet, this Christian political figure never stopped being a Jew. However hard his anti-Jewish detractors strove to undermine him, he outmaneuvered, outsmarted, and outlasted them.

Fortunately, it is not our responsibility or right to judge Disraeli. That is entirely left up to the Almighty. But I admit, without apology, that I still regard this wayward son of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue as one of our own.

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