

The Wisdom of Sir Moses Montefiore

By Geoffrey Clarfield

Today we commemorate the birthday of Sir Moses Montefiore, born on Oct. 24, 1784, and who passed away peacefully in England on July 28, 1885. He was more than 100 years old at the time of his death.



Moses Montefiore portrait from Israel Banknotes (Prachaya Roekdeethasreesab/Shutterstock)

Montefiore is remembered for many things: his commitment to the practice of the Orthodox Jewish faith in his adopted home of 19th-century England, his multi-functional membership in and leadership of the newly founded British Board of Jewish Deputies, and his creation of Jew's College in London, an institution designed to train British rabbis who are both loyal to the Orthodox Jewish faith and the world of science.

Montefiore was also philanthropic towards both the Jewish and non-Jewish poor and oppressed in Britain and especially in the Ottoman Empire where the "blood libel" – the myth that Jews used the blood of Christian children in religious rituals – was still flourishing.

An early champion of the return of Jews to Zion, Montefiore assisted in creating the conditions for the gainful employment

of Jews living in Eretz Yisrael, then under the yoke of the Ottomans. Toward the end of his life, Montefiore embraced those embattled Jews who were returning to the Land of Israel with the goal of reestablishing a Jewish State.

In Britain he is remembered (by those who read history) for his constant activism as an interfaith participant in the struggle for the religious and civil liberties of not only British Jews but also what were then called "nonconformists," namely the non-Anglican (dissenting) Protestant Sects and Irish/English Catholics who were not yet considered equal under British law of the time. He was also famous as a donor and fundraiser for a variety of charitable and what we would today call humanitarian causes.

Among his own coreligionists, he and his wife were known for their ability to rise high in the British class system, adopting and adjusting to the mores and sophistication of the ruling elites without succumbing to the post-Napoleonic French style of secular assimilation of German and French Jews or the temptations of a significant institutional attempt by British Missionary Christians to persuade Jews to leave the religion of their ancestors (as did his contemporary, Prime Minister Disraeli's family).

One must remember that Queen Victoria herself knighted Sir Moses for his support of the realm, as he served as sheriff of London.

In his adopted country home of rural Ramsgate, Montefiore adopted the traditional role of Lord of the Manor, likeable, kind, courteous, and charitable to all and sundry. He was respected and loved by the townsmen and farmers among whom he had chosen to live, and he flew his family flag with its coat of arms emblazoned with the Lion of Jerusalem with pride from the ramparts of Ramsgate.

Montefiore was proud to be a Jew and knew how to convey this

to all within the behavioral code of his time. He was both gentlemanly, aristocratic, and a humble servant of his people and the Crown. A complex and accomplished man.

Abigail Green is a British historian who works and teaches at Oxford University. In 2010, she published the most recent professionally researched biography of Sir Moses titled [*Moses Montefiore-Jewish Liberator and Imperial Hero*](#).

I read it cover to cover during my recent stay in Jerusalem. During my many walks in and around the old and new city, I meditated on Montefiore's accomplishments. This included a stroll by Montefiore's Windmill, a project he funded to give the first Jewish communities who lived outside of the Ottoman Walls of Jerusalem during the 19th century the energy they needed for gainful employment.

Green tells us the nuanced story of Montefiore in the context of 19th-century Britain and presents him to us at his best and worst moments, warts and all, as the British like to say. The fact that she is a professional historian and a partial descendant of the great man's family makes her book even more interesting. I recommend it highly.

Apart from gaining privileged access to the private papers and life of Montefiore through reading this marvelous book, I took away six lessons from his life and work that are even more relevant to the Anglosphere, the Jewish Diaspora, and the state of Israel today, as it fights another war of survival.

Unapologetically Jewish

Sir Moses Montefiore was unapologetically Jewish, not "A Jew at Home and a Man on the Street" but a Jew at home and in the public sphere. He attended synagogue services regularly, he prayed during the day, kept a kosher home, and brought kosher food to his office that was often perceived as so tasty by his non-Jewish colleagues that he would bring more than he needed when working at the London Stock Exchange and when he was

sheriff for the City of London.

His creation of Jew's College, a training seminary for future British rabbis, showed a deep understanding and dedication toward individual and Jewish communal continuity, and he collaborated closely with men whom he conceded were better educated and better read than he and his bibliophilic wife Judith, his constant companion in private and public. Dame Judith brought a feminine touch to everything Montefiore did or said.

With Great Wealth Comes Great Responsibility

Montefiore was descended from Sephardic (Spanish) Jews who lived and worked in the Italian port of Livorno, whose rulers allowed any Catholic, Protestant, or Jew to live and work freely without the impediment and restrictions that impoverished and restricted most Italian Jews of the time. And so, at the start of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century with its attendant revolution in insurance, finance, banking, and stocks, Montefiore and his family accumulated great wealth.

Instead of living a life of sybaritic luxury, the style of Europe's ruling classes, Montefiore used his financial power as a charitable donor and, later, his political clout as a knight of the realm, to ameliorate the suffering of all the poor at home and abroad.

He Created Interfaith Alliances

Montefiore knew that he was living in a Christian world with a growing continental secularism and a declining Ottoman Empire ruled by Sharia law. And so he reached out to nonconformists and dissenters as well as wealthy anti-slavery activists and philosemites in Britain and America to support Jewish and other minorities in the "East," Russia, and the Islamic world who suffered from government-directed persecution and local prejudice.

He Met With 'Pharoah' Face to Face

When the czar of Russia was forcefully recruiting impoverished and disfranchised Jews to his army, Montefiore showed up. When the Jews of Damascus were accused of the blood libel, he met with the ruler of Syria. When the Jews of Morocco were hounded and persecuted, he met with the sultan of Morocco.

In his meetings, he was polite, firm, diplomatic, and fearless, and he did his best to engage high-level British government support for the equal treatment of his coreligionists who were born into tyrannies. In that sense, he mirrored his biblical namesake, for he asked tyrants to live up to the more tolerant moral universalism that was being preached by fellow Britons such as John Stuart Mill.

He Recognized the Power of the Press

Montefiore recognized that the 19th century was the age of the telegraph and the newspaper, and so he assiduously organized campaigns of letters and what we would now call op-eds in his charitable and relief efforts. As a British knight, he was not insensitive to Irish Catholic suffering and gave charity during the potato famine. To improve global communication, he supported the newly emerging Jewish press, which flourished on the continent and throughout the Anglosphere.

He Was Skeptical of the French Revolution and the 'Rights of Man'

The language of today's human rights activists comes from the French Revolution, and it has failed for a variety of reasons. It has certainly failed to protect the state of Israel from a Marxist Islamic onslaught that has nearly destroyed the intellectual traditions of Western civilization in the universities, where writers like Abigail Green are now threatened by the Jacobin forces of Diversity, Equity and

Inclusion.

Instead, Montefiore embraced the very British concept of personal and religious liberty, recognizing that there are no rights that will protect Jews or the citizens of the Anglosphere that are not supported by the legal traditions and history of the English-speaking nations. Unlike with the French Revolutionists, English moral and political institutions are heavily influenced by the Old Testament and a belief in God.

That same Testament guided the life and altruism of Moses Montefiore. This is a quite different notion of freedom expounded by the morally irredeemable United Nations, inheritors of the dark side French Revolution with their strange Marxist and Islamist creeds. Montefiore believed in support of a British form of liberty that has stood the test of time, yet is under threat in today's Anglosphere.

Montefiore knew that Jewish freedom can only survive if the biblically inspired freedom of the Anglosphere is both recognized and protected. We need to remember his legacy on this day of his commemoration. It is a two-way legacy.

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