



The Damascus Blood Libel of 1840

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Among the most infamous and nefarious techniques devised by anti-Semites against Jewish minorities has been pursuit of the “blood libel,” the false accusation that Jews murder Christians or Muslims (mainly children) to use their blood for religious rituals, holidays, “medical” purposes, revenge, or mock crucifixions. Blood libel claims were often made to account for otherwise unexplained deaths of Christian and Muslim children, which offered Jew-haters a convenient opportunity to arouse hostility against Jews.

The blood libel originated among medieval Christian anti-Semites. The first known instance of a blood libel actually appears in the writings of Apion¹, a first century pagan Greco-Egyptian who claimed that the Jews sacrificed Greek victims in the Temple. The next recorded blood libel is from the fourth century in Syria, in the writings of Socrates Scholasticus², a Greek Christian church historian.² But it was only in the 12th century when blood libels became prevalent, as false accusations of Jewish ritual murder abounded throughout Christian Europe.

According to Walter Laqueur, author of *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism*, there have been 150 recorded blood libel cases and thousands more that aren't mentioned in the history books. Most incidents occurred in the Middle Ages and ended with murder, sometimes by a mob, and sometimes torture and a trial.

Unfortunately, blood libel charges are not just events of the past. They continue even today, and have made their way into political discourse, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2003, the rabidly anti-Israel British newspaper *The Independent* published a disturbing cartoon depicting then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon eating Palestinian babies. More alarmingly, the cartoon was awarded a prize. Even today, there are still some Christian and Muslim groups who believe that Jews kill innocent people for their blood.

The Missing Monk

In early February, 1840, an Italian monk, Padre (Father) Thomaso de Camangiano, Superior of a Capuchin³ cloister in Damascus, and his servant, mysteriously disappeared from Ottoman-ruled Damascus. Padre Thomaso practiced medicine and was well known in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim quarters.

This mysterious incident occurred during an especially complex political period in Syria. The region was changing from under the rule of the Egyptian Sultan Muhammad Ali, who was supported by France to Ottoman rule supported by Austria and Britain who sought to halt the expansion of French influence in the region. Meanwhile, both the Jews and the Christians of Syria, as minority groups, were vying for the support of the Muslim majority. This resulted in tensions between the local Jews and Christians, as they competed for the sympathy and favor of the Muslims. The Christians, fearing a wave of Muslim violence following the return of the Syrian regime to Ottoman rule, enlisted priests from Catholic orders, including the Franciscans and the Capuchins to help turn the political tide in their favor, by using the blood libel myths these priest brought to the Muslim country.

The news of the disappearance of Padre Thomaso⁴ began circulating throughout the communities in Damascus. Soon enough, rumors spread that the monk and his attendant had last been sighted in the Jewish quarter, and that the two had been murdered by Jews who needed blood for the Passover rites. The French consul at Damascus, Ratti Menton, supported Christian merchants and advisors over the Jews, and was thus eager to besmirch the Jews of Syria. He and his followers launched an investigation of the residents of the city's Jewish quarter. The accusations were made with the full support of the governor, Sherif Pasha, and the Egyptian pasha, Muhammad Ali.

1. Apion (20s BCE - c. 45-48 CE) headed one of the deputations sent to Caligula in 40 CE to charge the Jews with disloyalty following inter-communal riots that left many Greeks and Jews dead. Apion's criticisms of Jewish culture and history were replied to by Josephus in *Against Apion*.

2. Socrates Scholasticus should not be confused with the famous Greek philosopher Socrates.

3. The Capuchins are an order of Christian Monks that has existed since the 15th century.

4. Legend has it that before he disappeared, Padre Thomaso had cursed the Arab leaders, and an Arab who overheard his remarks expressed to numerous Arab figures his desire to behead him.



Sir Moses Montefiore



The tombstone of Tomaso de Camangiano which falsely claims that he was murdered by Jews.



Adolphe Cremieux



Drawing of Tomaso de Camangiano with his servant Ibrahim

A Tale of Torture

Menton ordered the random arrest of a Jewish barber named Solomon Negrin. Solomon was subjected to unfathomable torture until he finally “confessed” that Padre Tomaso had been killed in the house of a Jew named David Harari by a group of eight of the most distinguished leaders of the Jewish community.

These eight men were promptly arrested and tortured. Some of them had their teeth pulled, or were burned, beaten, immersed in ice water and forced to stand for 36 hours without food, water or sleep. Some had their eyes scored out. The authorities also levied a hefty fine from the Damascus Jewish community. Mr. Joseph Laniado, an elderly man who was among the eight alleged killers, died from the torture, and Mr. Moshe Abulafia, another prisoner, converted to Islam in order to escape the torment.

The group of arrested Jews also included Hacham Yaakov Antebi, the Chief Rabbi of Damascus. After his release, Hacham Yaakov wrote a letter⁵ to Sir Moses Montefiore describing how he suffered daily for six months, noting that not one inch of his body went unscathed. Despite his suffering, he was extremely careful about each word he uttered, knowing that it would be manipulated by his captors into an admission and used as an excuse for a pogrom.

At one point, the rabbi recalled, the Muslim ruler brought in the executioner, who thrust the blunt edge of his sword against Rabbi Antebi’s throat and asked him, “Do you confess?”

“No,” the rabbi said.

The executioner then turned the sword around and put the sharp edge against the prisoner’s throat.

At that point, Rabbi Antebi erupted in joyful dancing and singing.

“Are you crazy?” they asked him.

“No,” said Rabbi Antebi. “I just finally understood what our sages meant when they said, ‘Even if a sharp sword rests upon a person’s neck, he should not refrain from invoking divine compassion.’ It means that one should never lose hope – not only when they first put the sword’s blunt edge against your throat, but even when they turn the sword around and place its sharp edge against your throat!”

Ultimately, however, all eight captives surrendered to the torture and “confessed” to the heinous crime which they never committed. Ratti Menton published libels against the Jews in French and in Arabic, and Sherif Pasha wrote to his superior, Muhammad Ali, demanding authorization to execute the killers of Padre Thomas.

5. This letter is included in the book ‘Be’Or Ha’Hayim’ of Rabbi Haim Kapusi in the edition published (Jerusalem 1929) by Rabbi Abraham Yaakov Antebi.

A Public Outcry

One of the prisoners was Isaac Levi Piccioto, an Austrian citizen, who managed to escape prison and flee to the Austrian consul in Damascus, a man named Merlato. Merlato refused to return Isaac Levi Piccioto to jail to be tortured for a crime he did not commit, and he sent a letter to A. Laurin, the Austrian consul-general in Egypt, explaining the situation. Laurin appealed to Muhammad Ali to stop the torture of the innocent prisoners, and tried to influence the French consul-general in Egypt to restrain Menton.

After these requests were flatly ignored, Merlato sent a letter to James Mayer de Rothschild (1792 -1868), a Jew and honorary Austrian consul in Paris, asking him and other prominent French Jews to appeal to the French government to intervene. The French authorities paid no attention to the Jews’ petition, whereupon Rothschild released the report to the European press, and the Damascus Affair became public knowledge for the first time. Everyone was horrified by the accounts of unspeakable torture inflicted upon innocent citizens.

A prominent French lawyer and spokesman named Adolphe Cremieux appealed to King Louis Philippe and his Foreign Secretary to put an end to the barbaric torment of the Jews in Damascus. The French government, however, was interested in keeping Muhammad Ali in power, and was therefore not prepared to jeopardize its relations with Ali by intervening in its policies against the Jews.

Meanwhile, back in Austria, James Mayer de Rothschild approached Chancellor Metternich and asked for his intervention. And in England, prominent Jews such as the legendary Sir Moses Montefiore, along with Rothschild, appealed to the English Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, for help. Britain and Austria relished to opportunity to humiliate the French, and gladly intervened. Lord Palmerston promised to empower England’s consulate in Alexandria and his ambassador in Constantinople to use their influence with the Egyptian Pasha and the Turkish Sultan to help the Jews of Damascus. Soon enough, pressure was applied from all corners of the globe in support of the falsely accused Jews.

The public outcry extended across the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of the United States, marking the first time that American Jews made an organized effort to help Jews elsewhere in the world. In six American cities, a total of 15,000 Jews campaigned to pressure the U.S. government to intervene. Sure enough, President Martin Van Buren joined other world leaders in protesting the cruelty, and sent letters to the U.S. consul in Alexandria and the State Department’s Minister in Turkey instructing them to help the Jews in Damascus.

The “Great and Righteous Man” to the Rescue

Numerous philanthropists around the world wielded their influence to garner support on behalf of the Jews’ cause. Sir Moses Montefiore, backed by other influential philanthropists and leaders including Lord Palmerston, Adolphe Crémieux, Merlatto, missionary John Nicolayson, and Solomon Munk, led a delegation to the ruler of Syria, Mohammad Ali. Montefiore was intent on disproving the accusation against the innocent Jews of Damascus.

The Ottoman Turks were none too pleased to host the prominent Jewish philanthropist, but as he was traveling under a British diplomatic passport, he and his wife were welcomed and accorded full honor. Sir Montefiore succeeded in pressuring the Sultan, and on August 28, 1840, Muhammed Ali ordered Sherif Pasha to release the Jews who had survived the torture. In the months that followed, Muhammad Ali lost most of his influence in the region. Sherif Pasha was arrested by the Turks and dragged in chains to Cairo where he was eventually executed. The French consul, Ratti Menton, who instigated the arrests, emerged unharmed, and many sources say that he fled.

The Jewish lobby group did not stop its efforts after securing the release of the Jewish prisoners. Its members sought to ensure that blood libels of this kind would never again occur. Sir Moses Montefiore traveled to Constantinople, and received an audience with Sultan Abdul Megid. The Sultan issued a formal decree declaring claims of ritual murder an intentional libel against the Jewish people, and protecting the Jews of the Ottoman Empire from any future accusations of this kind.

Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *shelit”a*, describes Sir Moses Montefiore as “the great and righteous man” who “was not only great with all his charity that he gave, and the wonderful places he built, but also his loving kindness, for he sacrificed himself physically for others. He put his own life on the line to rescue from jail the great sage from Damascus, Syria – Hacham Yaakov Antebi.”⁶ Indeed, Sir Montefiore is credited with rescuing the Jewish prisoners of Damascus and ensuring that this tragic incident would not repeat itself.

The blood libel of 1840 sent shockwaves throughout the Jewish world. The Jews had thought that with the advent of the modern era, the world had “outgrown” these primitive forms of anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, this ugly manifestation of Jew-hatred was still alive and well in the early 19th century, and can still be found even in our times.

The French diplomat in Damascus knew full well that the disappearance of Padre Thomaso had nothing at all to do with the Jews. Yet, he ordered the arrest of the eight innocent Jews for the sake of advancing his political agenda. As has occurred so often throughout history, the Jews were used as convenient scapegoats by devious political figures seeking to extend their power and influence. We hope and pray that in the merit of all those who suffered and died *al kiddush Hashem* (for the sanctification of Gd’s name), *Mashiah* should come speedily in our days, *amen*.

Yehuda Azoulay is the author of A Legacy of Leaders, a groundbreaking English series containing biographies and stories of Sephardic hachamim. More information and articles can be found on his website at www.Sephardiclegacy.com

6. Hazon Ovadia -Avelut, vol. 1, pp. 420-422.

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