

Sir Moses Montefiore a.h.

(13 Heshvan 5545- 13 Av 5645 / October 28, 1784 - July 25, 1885)

125 years since the passing of a righteous man and one of Israel's greatest benefactors.

YEHUDA AZOULAY

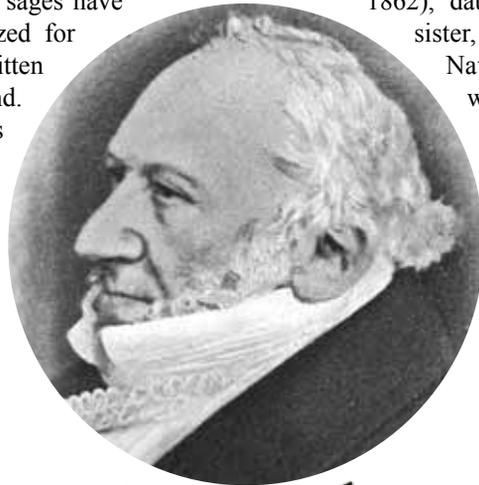
Throughout our nation's history, towering sages have arisen whose impact was felt and recognized for generations after their passing through the written works and halachic rulings that they left behind. By contrast, the generosity of the righteous philanthropists who selflessly worked and donated on behalf of important Jewish causes is generally forgotten after a generation or two. A striking exception to this rule is the great Sir Moses Haim Montefiore who left an indelible imprint upon future generations which is still felt to this day. This year marks the 125th year since his passing.

The Montefiore family, like many English Sephardic families, descended from crypto-Jewish families in Spain, Portugal, Mexico and other countries. The family came to England in the 18th century from Italy, and they took their name from the Italian village of Montefiore. The first Montefiore was Judah Leon Montefiore, the son of Joseph Leon, who was from a converso¹ family in Mexico.

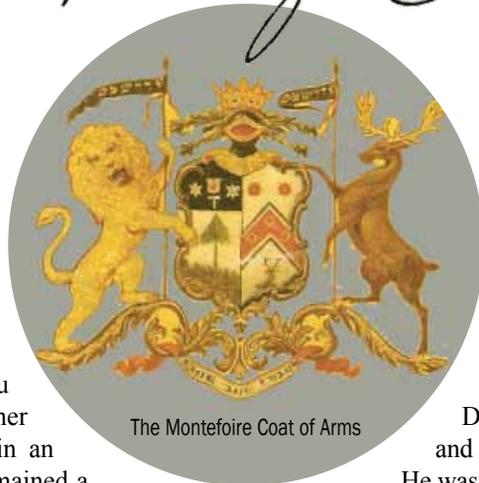
Sir Moses' grandfather, Moses Haim Montefiore, after whom he was named, was a Sephardic Jew from that Italian city, who later settled in London. He had seventeen sons, one of whom, Yosef Eliyahu, was Sir Moses' father. Moses was born on 13 Heshvan, 5545 (1784), while Yosef Eliyahu was traveling on business to Livorno together with his wife. He was raised in England in an atmosphere of Torah and *missvat*, and he remained a faithful, devout Jew throughout his entire life.

Moses grew to become the most famous British Jew of the 19th century, a legendary philanthropist, financier, banker, and community leader. He began his career as an apprentice in a business of grocers and tea merchants. He later left for London, and became one of the twelve "Jew brokers," Jewish merchants who had the right of trading at the Royal Exchange in London. He went into business with his brother Abraham, and their business became very successful.

In 1812, Sir Moses Montefiore married Judith Cohen (1784-



M. Montefiore



The Montefiore Coat of Arms

1862), daughter of Mr. Levi Barent Cohen. Judith's sister, Henriette, married the philanthropist Mr. Nathan Mayer Rothschild (1777-1836), for whom Sir Moses Montefiore's business acted as stockbrokers, and the two brothers-in-law eventually became business partners. Sir Moses Montefiore was a great leader and innovator in many fields. He invested in the supply of piped gas for street lighting to European cities via the Imperial Continental Gas Association, and served as a Director of the Provincial Bank of Ireland.

Sir Moses Montefiore amassed a huge fortune, and utilized his time and money for communal, civic, and religious purposes. He retired at the age of 40, whereupon he shifted his focus onto assisting world Jewry.

Sir Moses worked tirelessly to alleviate the distress of Jews around the globe. The details of his journeys overseas are well-documented. His travels brought him to countries such as Turkey, Morocco, Rome, Romania, France, Russia and elsewhere throughout North Africa and Europe, as well as to the Holy Land. His goal was not only to support and fund needy institutions, but to also lend a hand in anyway he could, including funding the building of communities from scratch.

He served as President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews for nearly forty years, and as a board member of Bevis Marks Synagogue.

He was also *gabbai* of the Sephardic Congregations of London, and was six times elected as Community Leader. He finally stepped down at the age of ninety, and the United Congregations of England gave him a farewell gift of twelve thousand pounds sterling. He donated the entire sum toward the construction of housing for the poor in Jerusalem.

Sir Moses and the Rothschild family raised a government loan in 1835 which enabled the British Government to compensate plantation owners and thereby abolish slavery in the Empire. Two years later, in 1837, he was elected Sheriff of London, a position in which he served for one year. In 1846, he was knighted by Queen Victoria.

¹ Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity or face expulsion from Spain in 1492.



Supporting and Rebuilding Israel

Sir Moses' standards of religious observance were minimal during in his early years, but after his first visit to the Holy Land in 1827, he became a strictly observant Jew. So much so, in fact, that he regularly traveled with a personal *shohet* to ensure that he would have a prepared supply of kosher meat.

Among the many properties that he purchased across England was a piece of land near his home, on which he had a private synagogue constructed. He commissioned his cousin, architect David Mocatta, to design the structure, which became known as the famous Montefiore synagogue. The synagogue opened in 1833 with a grand public ceremony.

After his wife's passing in 1862, he established a Sephardic yeshiva, the Judith Lady Montefiore College, in her memory at the stately East Cliff Lodge in Ramsgate, England. On the grounds he built the elegant, Regency architecture Montefiore Synagogue and mausoleum modeled after Rachel's Tomb outside Bethlehem (whose restoration and maintenance he had funded). Montefiore himself was buried there after his death in 1885.

Sir Moses traveled to the Holy Land by carriage and ship seven times. He donated large sums of money to support industry, education and health in Israel.

Sir Moses invested in and transformed the Jerusalem landscape, in an effort to help to burgeoning Jewish population become self-supporting, toward the eventual establishment of a Jewish homeland. The Sir Moses Montefiore Windmill was erected in Yemin Moshe, a neighborhood that is named after him and was the first Jewish neighborhood outside the Old City walls.² The funding came from the estate of an American Jew, Yehuda Touro, who appointed Montefiore as executor of his will.

He built a printing press and textile factory, and helped fund many agricultural settlements. He also exerted great efforts to acquire land for Jewish cultivation, though these were frustrated by Ottoman Empire restrictions. Later, in 1861, following a devastating cholera outbreak that was due largely to overcrowding, Montefiore built the Mishkenot Sha'ananim neighborhood outside Jerusalem's Old City. At the time, living outside the city walls was very dangerous, and Montefiore therefore offered financial incentives to encourage families to move there. If the families would all move together as a group, much of the dangers would be minimized.

In recognition of his work to benefit of the Jewish community in the Holy Land, the Jews referred to their patron as "*Ha-Sar Montefiore*" (Minister Montefiore).

Sir Moses Montefiore was renowned for his sharp, witty humor. A popularly-circulated account, possibly legendary, relates that at a dinner party he was once seated next to a nobleman who was known to be an anti-Semite. The nobleman told Sir Moses Montefiore that he had just returned from a trip to Japan, where "they have neither pigs nor Jews." Sir Moses Montefiore is reported to have responded immediately, "In that case, you and I should go there, so it will have a sample of each."³



Aid to Jewry Worldwide

In 1840, the Jewish community of Damascus was shaken by a blood libel. As had happened many times during the Middle Ages, at the expense of countless Jewish lives, the Jews were outrageously accused of killing a Christian child to use his blood for baking *massa*. The charge threatened the lives of not only the accused, but also the entire community, and Jews everywhere. Sir Moses Montefiore personally traveled to Damascus to intervene. With the assistance of several other figures, he managed to persuade the Sultan to issue an official statement proclaiming the blood libel false and prohibiting its renewal.

Hacham Ovadia Yosef, *shelita*, calls Sir Moses Montefiore, "The Great and Righteous Man." He writes, "He 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."⁴

An Enduring Legacy

Unfortunately, Sir Moses Montefiore never had children. Yet, his remarkable legacy of philanthropy still lives on, and his profound impact upon the Jewish world is felt even today. The town of Ramsgate in southern England is home to the Montefiore Museum, which displays many fascinating documents and articles related to the life and work of Sir Moses Montefiore.

The Montefiore Museum also contains an extraordinary collection of gold and silver artistry that Sir Moses Montefiore received as gifts from kings and heads of states. His *hillula* (anniversary) is observed yearly by the institutions which are maintained even today from the funds that he left for this purpose. The Shaare Tefillah Sephardic *Kollel* in Manchester, England is supported today primarily from the bequest of Sir Moses Montefiore from over one hundred and twenty five years ago.

The Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, New York is named for him, and a branch of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center also bears his name. A number of synagogues were also named in honor of the great Sir Moses Montefiore.

Sir Moses Montefiore left behind many memorials, the greatest of which being his reputation for *hesed* and generosity. As it says in *Pirke Avot* "There are three crowns, the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of kingship but the crown of a good name rises above them all."⁵ The illustrious Sir Moses Montefiore passed away on 13 Av, 5645/1885, three months before what would have been his one hundred and first birthday.

Sources:

- Yemin Moshe - The Story of a Jerusalem Neighborhood, Eliezer David Jaffe, Praeger and Greenwood Press Publishers, 1988, New York**
- Diaries of Sir Moses and Lady Montefiore, edited by Dr. L Loewe.**
- Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero, Abigail Green.**

² The windmill was built to provide cheap flour to poor Jews.

³ Novak, William, *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (Harper, 1981), p.83.

⁴ Hazon Ovadia -*Avelut*, vol. 1, pp. 420-422.

⁵ *Pirke Avot* 2; 8.