

JUDAH TOURO

America's first great philanthropist

On January 18, 1854, Judah Touro, died at his New Orleans home after a lingering illness. Two weeks earlier the 79 year old Jewish merchant had written his will in which he left nearly a half million dollars, an enormous sum in those days, to 65 charitable institutions and individuals. One of the bequests was especially noteworthy:

I wish to ameliorate the condition of our unfortunate Jewish brethren in the Holy Land, and to secure to them the inestimable privilege of worshipping the Almighty according to our religion, without molestation. I therefore bequeath the sum of fifty thousand dollars to be paid by my executors, for said object, through the said Sir Moses Montefiore, in such manner as he may advise, as best calculated to promote the aforesaid objects.

Although Judah had never met Sir Moses, he was aware of the English peer's efforts to promote agricultural colonies in Palestine. At the time, the 71 year old Montefiore was the best known Jew in the world, famed for his tireless work on behalf of endangered Jewish communities. Sir Moses usually travelled with an entourage that included a personal physician and in this capacity he was accompanied on five trips abroad by his long time friend Thomas Hodgkin who is best remembered for the lymphatic disease that bears his name.

Judah Touro was born in Newport, RI, June 16, 1775. His family were Sephardim who'd emigrated from Holland to the religiously tolerant Rhode Island colony. In 1658 fifteen Jewish families had settled in Newport and in 1763 the flourishing community dedicated the first synagogue in this country which remains active to this day. Five years earlier, Judah's father Isaac Touro arrived to serve as the *hazzan* (cantor) of the community. Most of Newport's Jews were Patriots and in 1776, shortly before the British captured the town almost all of them fled. But Isaac Touro was a Tory and moved with the English army to New York, and later in 1882 to British-held Jamaica, BWI.

Within a year there he died and his family, including nine year old Judah, returned to New York City where soon afterward, Mrs. Touro died. The children moved again, this time to Boston where they lived under the patronage of their wealthy uncle Moses Michael Hays. The Hays family then were the only Jews in Boston and were strictly observant. Judah's uncle was a banker, merchant and philanthropist who favored the Patriot side and was a close friend of Paul Revere and Thomas Paine.

(After the Revolution some Jews returned to Newport, the synagogue reopened and in 1790 the newly elected President George Washington, replying to a congratulatory letter from Moses Seixas, the community's leader, wrote that so long as they were good citizens anyone who lived under the new government's jurisdiction "shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree." This letter to the Newport community set the standard for religious freedom and civil liberty before the Bill of Rights was written. But the formerly successful local economy no longer was profitable and by 1823 no Jews remained in Newport.)

Growing up in Boston Judah fell in love with his first cousin Catherine Hays, but his uncle wouldn't agree to a marriage and arranged that the couple were kept apart. His love unrequited, in 1801 Judah moved to New Orleans, arriving there just two years before the Louisiana Purchase. He invested in steam ships and real estate and eventually became one of the country's wealthiest men. As he explained, "I have saved a fortune by strict economy while others had spent one ob their liberal expenditures" and, modest in his personal habits and bashful socially, he lived in a simple apartment.

In 1815 during the Battle of New Orleans, the 40 year old militia volunteer was struck in the thigh by a British cannonball and lay in the field near death. A friend Razim Shepherd carted him to safety and attended Judah for many months. Judah Touro detested slavery and sometimes purchased slaves in order to free them, even supporting some of their business ventures. During a Yellow Fever epidemic in 1852, he established the Touro infirmary as a small hospital for merchant sailors. It was a tolerant institution that treated all who were in need, including slaves and freedmen. (The infirmary still functions today.)

When Judah Touro died in New Orleans at age 79 in 1854, his will directed bequests totaling \$250,000 to various Jewish causes and another \$153,000 to non-Jewish causes. Funds were provided for each of the eighteen then existing synagogues in America and among other recipients, was he newly organized Jews Hospital in New York City — what later became Mount Sinai Hospital — which received \$20,000. A bequest of \$5,000 was made for his young love Catherine Hays who also had never married — “as an expression of the kind remembrance in which the esteemed friend is held by me.” The two had never met again in life and, unknown to Judah, Catherine died only a few days before him. Another legacy made it possible to reopen the long abandoned Newport synagogue where, at his request, Touro was buried with his family. Inscribed on his tombstone: “The last of his name, may he be inscribed in the Book of Philanthropy to be remembered forever.”

Six weeks after Touro’s death, one of his executors, Gershom Kursheedt, came to London to discuss details of the bequest with Montefiore. Sir Moses wanted to build a new hospital to be located just outside Jerusalem’s city walls. Kursheedt approved the plan and ten acres were bought from the city’s Arab Governor for 1,000 pounds sterling. In 1855, at an elaborate groundbreaking ceremony, Judah Touro’s ring was placed beneath the cornerstone, but because of local politics, the Jewish hospital was never built — the Rothschild family had beat them to it.

Instead, Montefiore had a housing colony built on the property for impoverished Jews that he called “Touro’s Almshouse.” Half of the “cottages” were designated for Ashkenazim, half for Sephardim and the inhabitants were enjoined to recite daily prayers in memory of Judah Touro as well as on the anniversary of his death. There were construction delays and the first tenants didn’t move in until 1875 during Sir Moses’ seventh and last visit to the Holy Land at age 90. It was the first Jewish colony built outside the old walls of the city and today the elegant neighborhood, that’s known as *Yemin Moshe*, is the site of “Montefiore’s Mill.”

Although historical accounts usually described Judah Touro as being benevolent and generous, the truth probably was more complex. Indeed, little is known of his personal life and he instructed that his papers be burned after his death. A eulogy published in a New Orleans newspaper recalled, “his person was scarcely

known. Yet his kind heart and delicate generousities made his name familiar in every mouth.”

A century later, rabbi-historian Bertram W. Korn wrote a “reappraisal” of Judah Touro based on letters written by Gershom Kursheedt, a journalist and broker who served as one of the estate’s four executors. (Jewish Quarterly Review, 1955.) Rabbi Korn suggested that the conventional description of Touro was “the product of wishful imagination; not supported by the few shreds of evidence which have been uncovered.” Instead, Touro seems to have been “crotchety, petulant and suspicious” and until the last seven years of his life was indifferent to the affairs of New Orleans’ Jewish community although he probably was the first Jew to establish permanent residence in the city.

That changed when Gershom Kursheedt arrived in New Orleans in 1841 and became a vigorous leader of the Jewish community which had fallen on hard times since its founding in 1828. He declared, “I have but one ambition in life, and that is to elevate the character of our people in the eyes of God and man.” Gershom Kursheedt persuaded his eccentric co-religionist to use his fortune to continue the work of his father who had been the *hazzan* of Newport’s synagogue. He convinced Touro to purchase an abandoned church in downtown New Orleans which was renovated into a 470 seat sanctuary. The dedication ceremony seemed to have a profound impact on Touro who, according to Kursheedt, “seemed to have returned to Judaism.” He began to attend services regularly, became Sabbath observant and among several other projects, funded construction of a home for Jewish widows and orphans.

But Kursheedt found that convincing a reluctant Touro was tortuous. As he wrote to a friend, “Mr. Touro is the very impersonation of a snail, not to say of a crab, whose progress is usually backward.” He rarely could make up his mind as to what he wanted and frequently had to be persuaded all over again: “The only answer I get is ‘well we will see’, ‘there is time enough, etc. etc.’ I cannot order the man....[but] I must be very careful to humor him or in an instant all may be lost.”

Indeed, Touro had to be goaded to support Jewish causes in his will as was documented in a letter Kursheedt wrote to Rabbi Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia several weeks after Touro's death:

Oh my dear friend, if you knew how I had to work to get that will made and how I strove to serve you, you would pity me. Alas, it was not altogether what I wanted, yet I am thankful to God that even if I injured myself, I got the most of what I asked for Israel — arguments, changes and counterchanges in the sums for institutions, til my heart sickened. I appeared calm, but indeed was almost crazy, ever dreading that nothing would be achieved in the end. The list of Jewish institutions I made up as well as I could. I had dreadful hard work to raise your Education Society from 10 to 20,000...Poor good old man, he had noble impulses, but his great misfortune was his want of education. Some of his notions were good, and to the extent that I can I will carry them out.

A week after writing this letter, Gershom Kursheedt was off to England to meet Moses Montefiore and several years later when their work in Jerusalem was completed, Sir Moses wrote these words to Kursheedt:

It must be a great happiness to you to know that with your great influence with the late Mr. Touro...you have been the means of directing the eyes and hearts of many of our brethren toward the Holy Land and contributing to the welfare of our coreligionists now dwelling in the land of our Fathers.

Judah Touro's memory rightfully lives on, but the unremembered man behind the scenes who crafted the philanthropist's famous will seems to have been Gershom Kursheedt of New Orleans. Have you ever heard of him?

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