

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 47)

Gershom Kursheedt and Sir Moses Montefiore

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from **Some Relations of Gershom Kursheedt and Sir Moses Montefiore** by D. DeSola Pool, Publications of the **American Jewish Historical Society** (1893-1961); 1947; 37, AJHS Journal, page 213 & ff. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

Introduction

Last month's Glimpses Into American Jewish History column, [The Man Who Brought Judah Touro Back To Judaism](#), discussed how legendary philanthropist Judah Touro's return to religious observance was influenced by Gershom Kursheedt (1817 – 1863). In addition, Kursheedt convinced Touro to leave considerable sums of money to support many Jewish causes.

In his will Judah Touro left his friend Gershom Kursheedt \$10,000 and appointed him as one of his three executors. Among Kursheedt's duties in this connection was that of making effective Touro's legacy of \$50,000 to secure the Jews of the Holy Land “the inestimable privilege of worshipping the Almighty according to our religion, without molestation.” Sir Moses Montefiore [1784 – 1885] was given discretionary powers “to promote the aforesaid objects.”

Judah Touro passed away on January 13, 1854. Later that year Gershom went to England to meet with Sir Moses to plan how they would carry out Touro's wishes. An entry in the daily diary Lady Montefiore kept for her husband, dated August 5, 1854, reads:

Mr. Gershon [sic] Kursheedt, one of the executors of the late Juda [sic] Touro, of New Orleans, arrived to arrange with Sir Moses about the legacy of fifty thousand dollars left at his disposal for the purpose of relieving the poor Israelites in the Holy Land in such manner as Sir Moses should advise.

Sir Moses, at the first interview he had with this gentleman, suggested that the money should be employed in building a hospital in Jerusalem. Mr. Kursheedt immediately assented ... He was most happy, as it settled the principal business he had in England; the co-executors had given him full power to agree to any plan Sir Moses should propose.

On April 25, 1855 Gershom together with Sir Moses and Lady Montefiore left for a trip to Palestine with the intention of laying the groundwork for building the proposed hospital. The journey was certainly arduous.

The visas on Gershom Kursheedt's passport help us trace their journey over Europe by way of Calais, Hanover, Cologne, Dresden, Prague, Vienna, Trieste, Corfu and Constantinople. There they had to wait to get letters and permits from the Sultan and the firman for building the hospital. Finally, on July 18, 1855, they arrived in Jerusalem, where they were given a royal welcome. About a month later, on August 15, 1855, in the presence of a numerous concourse of spectators of various religious denominations, they laid the foundation stone of the proposed hospital and planned the Touro almshouses.

Gershom eventually returned to England and in November of 1855 sailed for America. In April 1856 Sir Moses wrote to Gershom, "It must be a great happiness to you to know that with your great influence with the late Mr. Touro, Peace to his Soul, you have been the means of directing the eyes and hearts of many of our Brethren towards the Holy Land and contributing to the welfare of our coreligionists now dwelling in that land of our Fathers."¹

In 1857 Gershom returned to England and joined Lord and Lady Montefiore on another trip to the Holy Land.

This time they traveled to Jerusalem via Naples, Messina, Malta, Alexandria, and Jaffa. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they found that the Rothschilds had built a hospital there the preceding year. At the suggestion of the rabbis of Jerusalem, it was decided to use the Touro money instead for the erection of almshouses for "persons of excellent character, men as well learned in our law." So began plans for what constituted the first Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem outside the walls of the Old City [Later named Mishkenot Sha'ananim].²

Over the years Gershom gained the friendship and confidence of Sir Moses. In a letter to Gershom dated July 8, 1858 Sir Moses wrote:

I wish I could prevail on you to come and pass a couple of months with us in East Cliff. We could then conclude on the best plan for carrying out Mr. Touro's benevolent intentions without that delay which a correspondence across the Atlantic would occasion ... it would be of the greatest possible satisfaction to me to have the advantage of your advice on every point concerning the matter. Pray let me know can you without great inconvenience come (and come as soon as possible). We shall indeed be happy to have you. Lady Montefiore writes with me in kindest regards to you ... make our good wishes acceptable to your esteemed family.³

In 1859 Gershom again came to Europe - this time to assist Sir Moses in his efforts to have Edgar Mortara, a young child whom papal guards had violently abducted from the home of his Jewish parents in Bologna, Italy, returned.

Anna Morisi, a servant-girl at one time in the employ of the Mortara family, confessed to a priest that about four years before the abduction, when the child Edgar was very ill, she had secretly baptized him in order to save his soul if he should die. For some time she had concealed the fact, but her conscience gave her no rest, and so she was driven to make this confession. The priest to whom she confessed reported the matter to Rome, and the Congregation of the Inquisition gave orders that the child be taken forcibly from his parents and that he be educated as a Christian.⁴

On June 23, 1858 Edgar was indeed removed by force from his home. This provoked worldwide outrage, and Sir Moses and Gershom did their part to win the child's release. Sadly, all attempts to rescue Edgar from his non-Jewish environment proved fruitless.

Gershom did not marry until he was forty-three! On January 12, 1861 he married Grace Guedalla, Sir Moses' niece. However, two years later Gershom passed away from an illness that today would probably be curable.

His death was noted by obituaries in Jewish newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. London's *Jewish Chronicle* remembered Gershom as an exemplary Jew "who was known in wide circles in both hemispheres; respected by those who either came into contact with him or had the opportunity of observing the rare integrity, candour, dislike of all ostentation, strength of character, and purity of motives ... and a most enlarged sympathy with everything that was good and noble."⁵

¹ **The Seixas-Kursheedts and the Rise of Early American Jewry** by Kenneth Libo and Abigail Kursheedt Hoffman, Bloch Publishing Company, Inc. in conjunction with the American Jewish Historical Society, 2001, page 68.

² Ibid., pages 68 – 69.

³ Ibid., page 70

⁴ **Mortara Case** by Gotthard Deutsch, **The Jewish Encyclopedia**
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=809&letter=M>

⁵ **The Seixas-Kursheedts and the Rise of Early American Jewry**, pages 71 – 72.