

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

The Proposed Touro Monument and Rav S. R. Hirsch (II)

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Introduction

Recall that in last month's we outlined how a few years after Judah Touro's death a public movement was inaugurated by the citizens of New Orleans to erect a monument to his memory and that opposition to this tribute came from a number of Jewish rabbis throughout the country, who claimed that Judaism forbade the erection of any graven image, and that a statue came within the scope of prohibition. This led to an interesting theological controversy.

This matter was picked up by a number of national publications, including Isaac Leeser's **Occident**. Interestingly enough, many of the leaders of the Reform movement in America expressed their strong opposition to the project.

"The committee that had been appointed in New Orleans to set up the Touro statue could not continue with its plans in view of the excitement that this matter stirred up everywhere. It saw itself compelled to obtain the opinion of important European authorities as to whether the project was permissible according to Jewish religious law and usage. Accordingly, Rabbi [N. M.] Adler of London, Rabbi [Samson Raphael] Hirsch of Frankfort-on-the-Main, Rabbi [Shelomo Yehudah Leib] Rapoport of Prague, and Dr. [Z.] Frankel of Breslau were asked to express their opinion on this matter. All without exception were against setting up the statue of Touro."¹

The Response of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch

Readers may be surprised to learn that Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch was asked for his opinion regarding the erection of a monument to Touro.

"We usually think of [Rav] Hirsch as unique and different from the גדולים who preceded him, because of the new trails that he blazed in Jewish life, because of his historical and philosophical impact. This view, and this is very important for us to keep in mind, the view that Rav S. R. Hirsch was something new, this must not חיללה וחס detract from his image as a נגן עצום from the old school. The כהב סופר met him for the first time in 1848 in Vienna, when Rav Hirsch was the newly appointed Rav in Nikolsburg and the Landesrabbiner of all Moravia. The כהב סופר later wrote, "We talked in learning with the new Chief Rabbi. He is בקי in all of ש"ס ופוסקים. We are lucky that he thinks of us

(presumably the Hungarian Rabbonim), as greater than he. Would he only know his own greatness he would give us no rest.”²

In his reply Rav Hirsch wrote³:

“The erection of a statue, *i.e.*, of a human figure, of bronze, stone, or other material, is, according to Jewish law, prohibited in any place and for any object.

“In like manner does the Jewish law distinctly prohibit the erection of a monument, utterly devoid of any image, of a pillar, a stone, &c., for purposes of divine worship, and be it even to gather around it for the worship of the Holy One. (See Maim. Accum vi.6.)”

“But you have yourselves indicated in your esteemed communication, that you desire to observe in this question not only the express dicta of the law, but also the received usage in Israel, and that the project was only then intended to be executed, if it was not in conflict with the ‘laws and usages of Israel.’

“Looking upon this question in this light, it would indeed appear that the historical usage in Israel, prevailing throughout the whole Jewish past, would declare itself against the erection of a monument in honor of a man. As far as our knowledge reaches in ante-Mosaic or post-Mosaic times, monuments in commemoration of events or in relation to memorable localities are to be found; monuments as honorary mementoes of men are not to be found. Only one example is met with, that a monument was erected in commemoration of a man, and this — a vain man — Absalom, had erected to himself during his lifetime. However large the number of the great men of our nation (and there is assuredly no other nation which more gratefully cherishes the memory of its heroes in intellect and virtue), it has honored their memories by everything else except by monuments of metal or stone.

“Let us not forget that the Jewish mind does not recognize anything praiseworthy in the erection of not useful and salutary, although magnificent structures. (End. v. ירושלמי) A Rabbi who, on passing a magnificent Synagogue, boasted כמה ממון שקעו אבתו (שקלים) — ‘How much money have my fathers sunk here?’ received as reply, ‘כמה נפשות שקעו’ ‘How many souls have they sunk here?’ ‘Were there לא היו בנים דילעין באורייתא?’ ‘Are there no people in need of assistance to enable them to study the law?’ — And thus I believe, honored sirs, will you perhaps share my conviction, that were you to devote, in honor of the name of the deceased, the interest of the amount which the erection of a monument would cost towards the annual bestowal of a physical, intellectual, or moral benefit upon a single human soul, you would honor his memory, the more he was actually deserving such honor, in a more Jewish, *i.e.* truer and worthier manner, than by the most magnificent monument which you may execute in bronze or marble.

Conclusion

In the end the monument was never built. Benjamin II writes

“At this time, the Civil War in America broke out and ‘the Lord annulled their decision and made their purposes in vain.’ Although, because of this affair, I suffered much and had great losses, nevertheless I had the satisfaction of having acted according to my convictions and of having opposed, not without success, a memorial so public, so enduring and — so un-Jewish.”⁴

¹ **Drei Jahre in Amerika** has been translated into English under the title **Three Years in America: 1859 – 1862 Volumes I & II**, by I. J. Benjamin, translated from the German by Charles Reznikoff, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1956, page 324.

² **Rav S.R. Hirsch – The Gaon in Talmud and Mikra**, by Rav Yaakov Perlow, **The Living Hirschian Legacy**, Philipp Feldheim, Inc. New York – Jerusalem, 1988, pages 77 – 78.

³ An English translation of Rav Hirsh’s Teshuvoh, originally written in German, is given in **Three Years in America: 1859 – 1862 Volume I** on pages 327 - 329.

⁴ **Three Years in America: 1859 – 1862 Volume I**, page 333.