

The Jerusalem Rabbi Who Met President Ulysses S. Grant

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*Note: This article is based on the following sources: (1) **The First Rabbi: Origins of Conflict Between Orthodox and Reform : Jewish Polemic Warfare in Pre-Civil War America: A Biographical History**, by I. Harold Shafrman, Pangloss Pr, Santa Barbara, California, U.S.A., 1988, pages 527 - 531; (2) **Roumania, America, and World Jewry: Consul Peixotto in Bucharest, 1870 – 1876** by Lloyd P. Gartner, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (1961-1978); Sep 1968-Jun 1969; 58; and (3) **Palestine and Roumania: A Description of the Holy Land and the Past and Present State of Roumania and the Roumanian Jews** by Hayyim Zvi Sneersohn, Arno Press, New York, 1977.*

Introduction

The tradition of representatives of various communities and charities in Eretz Yisroel coming to America to collect funds dates back to the seventeenth century. One of the most fascinating of these *meshulachim* was Rabbi Chaim (Hayyim) Tzvi (Zevi, Zvi) Sneersohn, who came to America in 1869.

R. Sneersohn was born in Russia in 1833 or 1834. He was a great grandson of the *Baal HaTanya*, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Chassidus. In 1840 he emigrated to Eretz Yisroel (then known as Palestine) with his family. “His brilliance in Talmudic learning moved the rabbis to ordain him at his *Bar Mitzvah*. By 1860, as a young man, he traveled to India, Persia, China, and Australia, to raise funds for the poor of Jerusalem and Hebron; also to rebuild the walled city of Jerusalem.” (1) He also spent time in Rumania. Considering the difficulties of travel in the nineteenth century, one has to marvel at how he overcame the obstacles he must have encountered enroute to these far-flung places.

R. Sneersohn possessed daring and adaptability to an unusual degree. When he traveled as a *Meshullach*, he wore a white robe over a long yellow vest, a thick colorful belt, and a red oriental fez. He was a handsome man with piercing eyes. In short, as the portrait at http://personal.stevens.edu/~llevine/shneerson_portrait.pdf (3) clearly indicates, he made a striking and exotic impression on all who met him.

Visit to America

In the late 1860s R. Sneersohn left from Jerusalem for Paris and London, and finally arrived in New York in early 1869. However, he did not come to America to raise money. His goal was to improve relations between the United States and Palestine

through his personal diplomatic intervention. On February 17, 1869 Rabbi Sneersohn delivered a lecture at the New York Historical Society by invitation.

Shortly thereafter R. Sneersohn traveled to Washington, DC. “He lectured twice in the presence of large and appreciative audiences, among them the Turkish ambassador, members of the President's family, and several of the Ministry and of Congress. His elequence (sic) and fluency in the English language were generally admired, and his words made a good impression upon the audience.”(3)

He then managed to obtain an interview with Secretary of State Hamilton Fish. Rabbi Sneersohn pointed out that the American Consul had been mixing Christian proselytizing with his diplomatic duties. Indeed, the consul had personally tried to entice a Jewish girl to convert to Christianity. Not long after his meeting with Fish, R. Sneersohn was invited to meet the President of the United States!

Meeting with President Ulysses S. Grant

“The story of his visit, reported in *The National Intelligencer* of the capital city, was that Sneersohn, attired in his oriental costume, addressed the President. Grant then ‘rose courteously to receive the Rabbi’ who thereupon said:

Mr. President: Permit me to give my thanks to the Almighty, whose mercy brought me here to behold the face of the chosen by the millions of this great nation.... I come to your Excellency from the East, ... to entreat you in the name of God, who created all men equal, to listen to the prayer of your humble servant, standing before you to advocate the cause of his oppressed brethren in the Holy Land. The Israelites in Palestine possess no political or civil rights whatever, and oftentimes deprived of protection by the representatives of the civilized nations which the Christians enjoy, are exposed to violence and arbitrary rule. The only shelter the Israelites occasionally find is in the courts of the different European consulates, where one of their coreligionists is employed either as interpreter or deputy consul, who convey their grievances to the proper channel. This free Republic alone, whose banner covers the oppressed, whose foundation is based on equality, toleration, and liberty of conscience, has no Israelites employed near the consul at Jerusalem. I do pray, therefore, your Excellency, to turn your attention to the deplorable condition of my brethren in the Orient, that the principles of this Government may be truly embodied in its representatives abroad; and I do further pray that your Excellency may show me that mark of favor which will enable my brethren in the Holy Land in the hour of need to seek refuge under the Stars and Stripes, that this free country and its exalted chief should be blessed on the sacred spot of our common ancestors.

At the close of his address, the President, evidently deeply moved by the Rabbi's sincere and feeling words, inquired with interest as to the circumstances affecting the Jews at Jerusalem which might be guarded by the American Consulate; and replied, with his wonted quick decision, ‘I shall look into this matter with care.’

The Rabbi then closed the interview with the following fervent invocation: 'Before I part from you, Mr. President, allow me to offer my fervent prayer from the depth of my heart: Almighty God, whose dominion is an everlasting kingdom, may he bless and preserve, guard and assist your Excellency and your family. May the Supreme King of Kings grant you a long life, and inspire you with benevolence and friendship towards all mankind.'

At its close, the whole crowd, who had forgotten each his own personal interest in the impressive scene which was passing, were seen to be affected, some even to tears; and from some lips a fervent 'Amen' was heard in response. The President replied, with evident feeling, 'I thank you for your wishes and prayers.' While he was making a note for future reference, the Rabbi and his friends retired. Even office seekers seemed to say, 'That man's mission ought not to fail.' Of course, American sympathy will respond to such an appeal; and the American Government cannot refuse so humble a request as that the Israelites of our own and other lands shall have in the American Consulate at Jerusalem, an advocate whose voice will be heard throughout Christendom, as well as at the court of the greatest of the Mahomedan powers." (1 and 3)

Amazingly, "the erring diplomat was recalled, to the satisfaction of Palestinian Jewry and the delight of the meshullah who accomplished it. Why Grant and Fish willingly met the oddly clad foreigner is unclear, even though the global responsibilities of American Presidents were not very taxing. Curiosity or cordiality aside, the new President, only three months in office, desired to please Jewish opinion which had shown during the Presidential campaign of 1868 that it remembered his anti-Jewish General Order No. 11 of Civil War days." (2)

His Trip Across America

Shortly after meeting with President Grant R. Sneersohn embarked upon a tour that took him all the way across America to California.

In May, he traveled to Cincinnati, where he told audiences that he felt he could discern the finger of God pointing to a day "not far distant, he hoped, when the great deliverance would take place and the land [of Israel] be restored to the Jewish people." Returning to New York, Sneersohn lectured at Cooper Institute, introduced by the Christian clergyman, Reverend Dr. Howard Crosby. He stressed the need to purchase land and erect buildings, because the restoration would not be accomplished just by the word of God. He pointed out that Abraham too, bought land, even though it had been divinely promised to him. America, he felt, was the chosen agent for the restoration of the Jewish homeland. (1)

He returned to New York for Pesach and then, on April 27, 1870, began the long railroad trip that would take him cross country to California. (The transcontinental railroad was completed on May 10, 1869.) There he delivered major addresses in Los Angeles and San

Francisco. As he traveled across America, R. Sneersohn received a number of invitations to speak before Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. Perhaps the most interesting is the following:

SALT LAKE CITY, U. T., November, 1870.

RABBI H. Z. Sneersohn, San Francisco:

DEAR SIR — Your favor of 29th ult. is to hand. In reply permit me to say it will afford our citizens much pleasure to have you address them in the Tabernacle on subjects of such deep and abiding interest to us all as the past history and present condition of God's covenant people Israel.

If possible please inform me, a day or two in advance of your coming, when you will be here, so that the people may be notified through the Press of your intended visit, and the Tabernacle be prepared for your lecture.

I remain, Dear Sir, Very Sincerely Yours,
In the cause of Israel,
BRIGHAM YOUNG. (3, page xv)

(I have not been able to determine if R. Sneersohn actually accepted Brigham Young's invitation to address the Mormons at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City.)

Efforts on Behalf of Rumanian Jewry

R. Sneersohn had visited Rumania twice during the 1860s. While there he witnessed the terrible state of degradation in which the country's 500,000 Jews were forced to live. Beginning in 1866 orders were issued confiscating Jewish property. Jewish farmers were expelled from their farms, and contracts made by Jewish farmers with either the government or private persons were annulled. Many Jews were indiscriminately arrested by the army and forced to leave Rumania without due process. The lives of the Jews of Rumania became intolerable.

In light of his success in getting the American consul to Jerusalem removed, Rabbi Sneersohn, on January 19, 1870, while visiting Chicago, wrote a long letter to President Grant on behalf of his downtrodden brethren in Rumania. After thanking the President for appointing a new consul to Jerusalem, he continued,

Therefore, I feel myself encouraged in again praying to the great American people and their chosen chieftain. Five hundred thousand souls in Roumania are ... subject to the malicious will of all. Their crime is their belief in One God; their sin, that they are scions of the stock of Abraham.

The children of Israel live there as a scattered flock of defenseless sheep — as helpless orphans. None takes heed of their wailings. On all the earth there is no

Israelite the occupant of a throne or in any position of might, whence he could speak a weighty word for these unfortunates.

The influence of the United States can be exerted in two different ways ... in the appointment of consuls friendly toward our race in that country [Roumania]; but more especially would such an appointment prove efficacious ... if a Jewish citizen were sent there as consul... (1, page 89)

After his signature on this letter he added the title “Rabbi from Jerusalem,” implicitly giving the impression that his request had some sort of diplomatic status.

Behind the scenes Rabbi Sneersohn lobbied for the appointment of Benjamin Franklin Peixotto (1834 – 1890) as consul to Rumania. He had met Peixotto in California and was most impressed by him. Peixotto, a descendent of colonial Sephardic Jewry, was the grandson of Moses Levi Maduro Peixotto (1767 – 1828), who served as Hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel of New York from 1816 to 1828. His father was Dr. Daniel Levy Maduro Peixotto (1800 – 1843), a well-known physician.

There were other contenders for the position and few expected R. Sneersohn’ efforts to be successful. However, on July 8, 1870 the *Jewish Messenger* reported Peixotto’s confirmation by the Senate in this unsalaried post.

Peixotto left San Francisco on November 2, 1870, and sailed from New York seven weeks later. He finally arrived in Bucharest on February 11, 1871. Rabbi Aaron J. Messing of San Francisco trumpeted the diplomatic feat achieved in Washington in the European Hebrew and Jewish press. His words must have been music to Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Sneersohn’s ears, “for the Palestinian received virtually full credit for the appointment of Peixotto.” (2) The rabbi had again accomplished what many thought impossible!

The First Proto-Israeli Diplomat

R. Shneersohn eventually returned to Jerusalem, becoming an American citizen before his departure from the United States. He died in South Africa in 1881 or 1882 while on a mission to collect funds for the needy in Israel. He had one son, Moshe, and two daughters. There is no record of any grandchildren.

In most of his talks Rabbi Sneersohn stressed the idea that the Jews would soon be given control of Eretz Yisroel. He proposed plans for the return of the Jews in large numbers to Eretz Yisroel and for the building of viable Jewish agricultural communities there. His ideas were similar to those later proposed by a number of Zionists. At the time many felt that his proposals were mere dreams, but we know from a historical perspective that his proposals were indeed achievable.

R. Shneersohn became convinced that “the Stars and Stripes would be a banner protecting the oppressed people of Israel.” His success in influencing the appointment of

a new consul to Jerusalem and a Jewish consul in Bucharest, Rumania made him the first proto-Israeli diplomat.