The Proposed Touro Monument and Rav S. R. Hirsch

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INTRODUCTION

Judah Touro (1775-1854), who resided in New Orleans from 1802 until his death, is best remembered for his philanthropic activities.

“Touro’s name will always be numbered among the foremost in the annals of American philanthropy. His charities knew neither race nor creed, and his public spirit was no less noteworthy. “Though he gave liberally to charitable objects during his entire life, the provisions of the will of Touro, who died unmarried, disposed of over half a million dollars in charity, an enormous sum in those days. These provisions were published throughout the United States and in the journals and periodicals of many European countries. Among the larger bequests were $80,000 for founding the New Orleans Almshouse, a number of Jewish rabbis throughout the country, who claimed that Judaism opposed 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, much of which has been preserved in Benjamin’s Drei Jahre in Amerika.”

The author of Three Years in America [the English translation of the just mentioned German book], Yisroel ben Yosef Benjamin, was a most interesting character who became known as Benjamin II as a result of his extensive travels throughout the world. Benjamin II was born in 1818 in Folticheni, which was then part of the Turkish province of Moldavia. (Subsequently, this became part of Rumania.) After his marriage, he was successfully engaged in the lumber business. However, after a few years, he suffered financial reverses and gave up business, deciding to become a traveling maggid instead. “Being of an adventurous disposition, he adopted the name of Benjamin of Tudela, the famous Jewish traveler of the twelfth century, and toward the end of 1844 set out to search for the Lost Ten Tribes. He went to Italy, embarking there for Algeria instead.

A MONUMENT TO JUDEA TOURO

“A few years after his death, a public movement was inaugurated by the citizens of New Orleans to erect a monument to his memory, but 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.”

Fifteen of the 58 codicils of Touro’s will dealt with giving money to various institutions located in New Orleans. It is little wonder, then, that at “the funeral exercises at New Orleans, Jew and Gentile vied with each other in their expressions of grief and respect, and these were even more marked at the obsequies at Newport, Rhode Island, on June 6, of the same year, 1854, which were attended by delegations from the numerous organizations he had so generously remembered, coming from all over the land. By official resolution of the public authorities of Newport, which had benefited so largely by his philanthropy, his executors and all these delegations became the guests of the municipality. During the funeral procession, the bells of the various churches were tolled, and all places of business were closed.” [Touro had stipulated in his will that “I desire that my mortal remains be buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Newport, Rhode Island, as soon as practicable after my decease.”]

Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch zt”l
and Morocco. On arriving in France, after having traveled for eight years, he prepared in Hebrew his impressions of travel, and had the book translated into French.

“In 1859, Benjamin undertook another journey, this time to America, where he stayed three years. The result of his observations there he published on his return, under the title Drei Jahre in Amerika (Hannover, 1863). The kings of Sweden and of Hanover now conferred distinctions upon him. Encouraged by the sympathy of several scientists, who drew up a plan and a series of suggestions for his guidance, he determined to go again to Asia and Africa, and went to London in order to raise funds for this journey—a journey which was not to be undertaken. Worn out by fatigues and privations, which had caused him to grow old before his time and gave him the appearance of age, he died poor in London [in 1864], and his friends and admirers had to arrange a public subscription in order to save his wife and property. His journey—a journey which was not to be undertaken—caused heated discussion amongst those present, with some against the idea of such a monument and others in favor. The next day, Benjamin II went to speak with Mr. J. K. Gutheim, the preacher and chazzan of the Portuguese synagogue, who was strongly in favor of erecting the monument. He pointed out that erecting such a statue was forbidden by halacha, but Gutheim would not change his mind. Benjamin II realized that he had no recourse but to register a public protest, so he published his views on the matter in the Cornerstone, a periodical read by most of New Orleans’ Jews.

Benjamin II’s article created a great sensation. An article attacking him soon appeared in another publication. The controversy heated up to the point where Benjamin II was pressured by the Hebrew Foreign Mission to withdraw his protest to the erection of this statue or else the grant of $300 annually for three years that he had been promised would be withdrawn. When he refused to back down, the grant was indeed rescinded! Benjamin II, fearing for his safety, soon left New Orleans for Cincinnati.

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 [Shamshon Raphael] Hirsch of Frankfort-on-the-Main,
Rabbi [Shlomo 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.” 9

The Response of Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch

Readers may be surprised to learn that Rav Shamshon 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 gedolim who preceded him, because of the new trails that 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, chillah ve-chas, detract from his image as a gaon atzum from the old school. The Ksav Sofer met him for the first time in 1848 in Vienna, when Rav Hirsch was the newly appointed rosh in Nikolsburg and the Landesrabbiner of all Moravia. The Ksav Sofer later wrote, ‘We talked in learning with the new Chief of all Moravia. The zum lamdanim met him for the first time and broke out and ‘the Lord annulled their devices 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 - Avshalom, 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 gracefully 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 satalary, although magnificent structures (end. v. Yerushalmi Shekolim). A rabbis who, on passing a magnificent synagogue, boasted, ‘Kamath mammon vochak le’avoscha kan - How many souls have they sunk here? Lo hevrek homin dilin be’orosah - Were 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., true 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 decrees 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.” 10

(Endnotes)

2. For the details of Touro’s will, see Judah Touro, Merchant and Philanthropist, by Max J. Kohler, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1906), 1905, 13, AJHS Journal page 91 ff. This article is available at website.
3. Ibid.
5. Drei Jahre in America has been translated into English under the title Three Years in America: 1859-1862 Volumes I & II, by L. J. Benjamin, translated from the German by Charles Reznikoff, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1956.
8. Ibid., page 321
9. Ibid., page 324
10. Rav S. R. Hirsch - The Gaon in Talmud and Midrash, by Yaakov Perlow, The Living Talmudical Academy, Route 524, Adelphia, NJ 07710
11. An English translation of Rav Hirsh’s Drei Jahre in America has been translated into English under the title Three Years in America: 1859-1862 Volume I, page 333.

Judah Touro

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