

The Proposed Touro Monument and Rav S. R. Hirsch

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Department of Mathematical Sciences

Stevens Institute of Technology

Hoboken, NJ

llevine@stevens.edu

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 even in the journals and periodicals of many European countries. Among the larger bequests were \$80,000 for founding the New Orleans Almshouse, liberal endowments for nearly all the Jewish congregations of the country, bequests to the Massachusetts Female Hospital, the Female Asylum, and the Boys' Asylum of Boston, and one for the preservation of the old cemetery at Newport, and for the payment of the salary of the minister of the old synagogue in that city. A large sum was also left in trust to Sir Moses Montefiore for almshouses in Jerusalem. In addition to these, there were private bequests.”¹

Fifteen of the 58 codicils of Touro's will dealt with giving money to various institutions located in New Orleans.² 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.”³ [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.”]

A MONUMENT TO JUDAH 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, 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*”^{4,5}

The author of *Three Years in America* [the English translation of the just mentioned German book], Yisroel ben Yosef Benyamin, 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 first went to Vienna, and in January, 1845, started for Constantinople, visiting several cities on the Mediterranean. He landed at Alexandria [in] June, 1847, and proceeded via Cairo to Palestine. He then traveled through Syria, Babylonia, Kurdistan, Persia, the Indies, Kabul, and Afghanistan, returning [in] June, 1851, to Constantinople, and thence to Vienna. After a short stay in the last-named city, he went to Italy, embarking there for Algeria 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* (Hanover, 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 daughter from misery.”⁶

BENJAMIN II OBJECTS TO THE PROPOSED TOURO MONUMENT

Arriving in New York on July 26, 1859, Yisroel ben Yosef Benyamin traveled extensively throughout the United States. In fact, he traveled across America to California. On the way, he spent time in a variety of small and large towns and cities. One must keep in mind that these travels were undertaken before the Continental Railroad was built. Travel in the middle of the 19th century was both dangerous and arduous.

Benjamin II finally arrived in New Orleans in early April, 1860. He was well received by the Jewish community. Indeed, on April 19, he received a letter from an organization known as Hebrath Mashmie Yeshuah (the Hebrew Foreign Mission), which said:

“I have the pleasure to inform you herewith of the following resolution, unanimously adopted by the Board of Directors of the Hebrew Foreign Mission, at their

meeting on the tenth inst. It was decided that the sum of three hundred dollars be paid annually to Mr. Israel Joseph Benjamin from Falticeni in Moldavia from the treasury of this society, for three successive years, to defray the expenses of this seasoned traveler in his contemplated voyage to Arabia, Malabar and China for the purpose of discovering the condition of our fellow Jews in those lands and to report upon it; and the above sum, so granted, will be forwarded to the above-named Mr. Benjamin together with similar grants made by other corporations of this country, or through a consul in Europe.”⁷

However, within a few weeks, this resolution was revoked. Here is what happened.

On April 29, 1860, a considerable number of the Jewish residents of New Orleans met to discuss Benjamin II’s projected trip to the Orient. After discussing this matter, the attendees were informed that Nefutzoth Yehudah, the Portuguese congregation in New Orleans, was planning to set up a statue of Judah Touro as a memorial to the man who had been a benefactor of so many institutions in the city. This statue would be cast in bronze and set up in the outer courtyard of the Portuguese synagogue. Assistance in funding this project was to be sought from the other synagogues in New Orleans as well as from congregations throughout America.

Benjamin II, shocked to hear of this proposal, asked for permission to speak. He said:

“Gentlemen, although I am only passing through the city and, therefore, have no right to take the floor in the discussion of community affairs, I see myself forced to express my views in this matter, because this concerns our religion, and in such a case every Israelite has the right to speak. When I was young, I spent much time in Jewish studies and have recently seen four continents and have learnt something at firsthand about millions of my fellow Jews. Nowhere did I see or find the statue of a Jew: because this is clearly against the principles of our holy religion.”⁸

This immediately 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 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, *chalilah vechas*, 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 *rov* in Nikolsburg and the Landesrabbiner of all Moravia. The *Ksav Sofer* later wrote, ‘We talked in learning with the new Chief Rabbi. He is *baki* in all of *Shas uposkim*. We are lucky that he thinks of us (presumably the Hungarian *rabbonim*) as greater *lamdanim* than he. Would he only know his own greatness, he would give us no rest.’¹⁰

In his reply, Rav Hirsch wrote¹¹:

“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, etc., 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 - 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 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. *Yerushalmi Shekolim*). A rabbi who, on passing a magnificent synagogue, boasted, ‘*Kamah mammon shok’uh avoso kan* - How much money have my fathers sunk here?’ received as reply, ‘*Kamah nefashos shok’uh avosecha kan* - How many souls have they sunk here!’ *Lo haveh bonim dilin be’orasiah* - 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., 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.”¹²

¹ *Touro, Judah*, by Joseph Jacobs and L. Hühner, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Volume 12, Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1901-1906, pages 212- 213. This article is available at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=283&letter=T>

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 (1893-1961)*; 1905; 13, *AJHS Journal* page 93 ff. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Touro, Judah*, by Joseph Jacobs and L. Hühner, The Jewish Encyclopedia.

⁵ *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.

⁶ *Benjamin II., J. J.* by Isador Singer and E. Schwartzfeld, The Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume 3, Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1901-1906, pages 25- 26. This article is available at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=714&letter=B&search=benjamin%20ii>

⁷ *Three Years in America: 1859-1862 Volume I*, page 318.

⁸ Ibid., page 321

⁹ Ibid., page 324

¹⁰ *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.

¹¹ An English translation of Rav Hirsh's *teshuvah*, originally written in German, is given in *Three Years in America: 1859-1862 Volume I* on pages 327 - 329.

¹² *Three Years in America: 1859-1862 Volume I*, page 333.