

# **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part )**

## **The Proposed Touro Monument (Part I)**

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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 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Fifteen of the 58 codicils of Touro's will dealt with giving money to various institutions located in New Orleans.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> [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**”<sup>4,5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup>

### 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. Travel in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was both dangerous and arduous. To get to California, Benjamin II went by ship to Panama, then crossed the Isthmus by rail, and then on to California by sea. During his travels 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.

Benjamin II finally arrived in New Orleans in early April, 1860. He was well received by the Jewish community. Indeed, on April 19<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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 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 first hand 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.”<sup>8</sup>

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 *hazzan* of the Portuguese synagogue, who was strongly in favor of erecting the monument. He pointed out that erecting such a statue was forbidden by Jewish law, 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.

To be continued.

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<sup>1</sup> **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>

<sup>2</sup> 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/reference/adaje.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> **Touro, Judah**, by Joseph Jacobs and L. Hühner, **The Jewish Encyclopedia**.

<sup>5</sup> **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.

<sup>6</sup> **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>

<sup>7</sup> **Three Years in America: 1859 – 1862 Volume I**, page 318.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., page 321