

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

American Jewry and the Damascus Blood Libel of 1840

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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **The Damascus Affair of 1840 and the Jews of America** by Joseph Jacobs, **Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society** (1893-1961); 1902; 10, *AJHS Journal*. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>*

Introduction

Anyone familiar with Jewish history has undoubtedly heard of the infamous charges of blood libel that Jews have been accused of for centuries.

The first recorded instance of a blood libel against Jews was in the writings of Apion, who claimed that the Jews sacrificed Greek victims in the Temple of Jerusalem. After this, there are no existent records of the blood libel against the Jews until the 12th century legend surrounding William of Norwich, first recorded in the Peterborough Chronicle. The libel afterward became an increasingly common accusation. In many subsequent cases, anti-Semitic blood libels served as the basis for a *blood libel cult*, in which the alleged victim of human sacrifice was venerated as a Christian martyr. Many Jews were killed as a result of false blood libels, which continued into the 20th century, with the Beilis Trial in Russia and the Kielce pogrom in post-World War II Poland.¹

In 1840 the Jews of Damascus were accused of ritual murder. Damascus (and all of Syria) was at this time controlled by Mohammed Ali, pasha of Egypt, and the governor of Damascus was Sherif Pasha, an Egyptian Arab.

On Feb. 5, 1840, Father Thomas, originally from Sardinia, and the superior of a Franciscan convent at Damascus, disappeared with his servant. This monk, who practised medicine, was very well known in the Jewish and Mohammedan quarters, as well as among the Christians. Some days previous he had had a dispute with a Turkish muleteer, who had heard him blaspheme Mohammed, whereupon the Turk is reported to have said: "That dog of a Christian shall die by my hand." Upon Thomas' disappearance the French consul at Damascus, Ratti Menton, who was an enemy to the Jews, following the advice of certain monks, instituted investigations in the Jewish quarter; and the governor, Sherif Pasha, pretending to act merely in accordance with the friendly relations existing

between the governments of Louis Philippe and Mohammed Ali, aided the French consul in a culpable way.

A confession was extorted by torture from a Jewish barber named Negrin, and eight of the most notable Jews, among them Joseph Lañado, Moses Abulafia, and Farhi, were imprisoned and tortured. Their teeth and beards were pulled out, they were burned, and finally tempted with gold, to persuade them to confess an imaginary crime. Lañado, a feeble old man, died under this treatment. Moses Abulafia became a Mohammedan in order to escape the torture. In spite of the stoic courage displayed by the sufferers, Sherif Pasha and Ratti Menton agreed on the guilt of the accused in view of the words resembling a confession that had escaped them in their agony. While Ratti Menton published libels against the Jews in French and in Arabic, Sherif Pasha wrote to his master, Mohammed Ali, demanding authorization to execute the murderers of Father Thomas. In the mean time the populace fell upon the synagogue in the suburb of Jobar, pillaged it, and destroyed the scrolls of the Law.²

Jewish communities in Europe and America held public meetings protesting this treatment of the Jews of Damascus, and mediators were sent to Egypt to meet with Mohammed Ali. Finally, on August 28, 1840 Ali was convinced of the innocence of the Jewish prisoners. Nine of the original thirteen were released on September 6. The other four had succumbed to the horrors of imprisonment and torture.

The Response of American Jewry

The response of American Jews to the accusation of ritual murder in Damascus marks the first time that American Jewry publicly became involved in a matter of importance to the honor of world Jewry.

Meanwhile news of the dire events at Damascus had reached the shores of America, and the Jews of this country prepared to join in, for the first time in their history, with the exertions of their European brothers, on a matter affecting the honour of all Jewry. It is somewhat difficult to account for the lateness of their action. So far as I can ascertain, it took about 30 days for the European mails to reach America, yet it was not till Aug. 17 that a meeting was held in New York with J. B. Kursheet [Israel Baer Kursheedt³] as Chairman and Theodore J. Seixas as Secretary which, passed resolutions expressing their horror at the treatment of the Damascus Jews and calling upon the President of the United States to intervene on their behalf. Five days later - time went more leisurely in those days - this resolution was sent to Washington, whence almost by return on Aug. 26th. Mr. John Forsyth, the Secretary of State, replied informing the New York Jews that already on the 14th inst. a letter had been sent to Mr. Gliddon, the U. S. consul at Alexandria, ordering him to do all in his power to help redress the wrongs of the Damascus Jews.

On Thursday evening, Aug. 27th, the Jews of Philadelphia held in the vestry of the Mikve Israel Synagogue a memorable meeting at which were present not alone the chief Jews of the city but several representative Christian clergymen, Dr. Ducachet, Rector of St. Stephens, Dr. Ramsay, a Presbyterian minister, and the Rev. Mr. Kennedy, all of whom ultimately spoke. The meeting appears to have been summoned by Hyman Gratz, but the most important figure at it and the orator of the evening was undoubtedly Isaac Leeser⁴, then in the height of his powers. He took the bold course of repudiating the blood-accusation by the simple argument that as both Christianity and Islam were derived from Judaism, if the last advocated ritual murder, the daughter-religions would equally be guilty of the same practice.

Given that Mohammed Ali had acknowledged the innocence of the accused Jews on August 28, it is clear that these actions taken by American Jews turned out to be unnecessary.

But though the action of the American Jews had no immediate effect, it was not for naught that they had taken a worthy share in the universal protest of Israel against the blood-accusation which affected the honor of all Jews.

When the next occasion arose for united action in the Mortara case, even distant California took part in the universal protest of all Jewry, and in the Russian and Roumanian atrocities of the past 20 years the Jews of America have been expected to take their share in any diplomacy or action that was needed, and have nobly fulfilled that expectation. Their part in the Damascus affair was thus the beginning of the diplomatic or international phase in the history of 'the American Jews, and in this sense, I venture to think, deserves somewhat fuller attention than has hitherto been given to it.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_libel

² **Damascus Affair**, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1906, page 420. The article is also available at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=22&letter=D>

³ For more about I. B. Kursheedt see **America's First Torah Scholar: Israel Baer Kursheedt**, *The Jewish Press*, February 7, 2007, page 1. (<http://www.jewishpress.com/content.cfm?contentid=20616>)

⁴ For more about Isaac Leeser see **Isaac Leeser: Architect of Traditional Judaism in America**, *The Jewish Press*, June 22, 2007, page 1. (<http://www.jewishpress.com/content.cfm?contentid=21906>)