

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 1)

Judah Touro (1775 – 1854)

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Introduction

“[Judah] 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.”¹

Touro accumulated a huge fortune during his lifetime, dying a very wealthy man.

“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.”²

Humble Beginnings

Judah Touro was born in Newport, RI on June 16, 1775. His father, Isaac, was the Dutch born Chazzan of Congregation Yeshuat Israel (later known as the Touro Synagogue); his mother was Reyna Hays was born in America. Chazzan Touro sided with the British during the Revolutionary War and even received a stipend from them after the British captured Newport. When he relocated to New York City in 1780, which was at that time under British rule, he also benefitted from British largesse. By the end of 1782 it became increasingly clear that the British would lose the war, so Isaac Touro and his family emigrated to Jamaica. When Chazzan Touro passed away on December 8, 1783, his widow and her four children returned to Boston, where they lived in the home of Mrs. Touro's brother, Moses Michael Hays. Mrs. Touro passed away on September 28, 1787, leaving Judah an orphan at age 12.

Of Touro's youth in Boston, hardly anything is known. He probably received little formal education; years later, Gershom Kursheedt—who knew him very well—

said that Touro's "great misfortune was in his want of education." This probably meant, at the very least, that Touro evinced no interest in cultural matters. Moses Michael Hays was a prosperous merchant and insurance broker; Judah and his younger brother Abraham seem to have been apprenticed in their uncle's counting house at a fairly young age and to have learned there the ways of commerce which they followed for the rest of their lives.³

New Orleans

In 1802 Judah Touro settled in News Orleans, Louisiana, a small town of about 10,000 inhabitants, which at that time was under the control of the French. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 the region came under American rule.

There he opened a store, and soon built up a thriving trade in New-England products. Later he became the owner of many ships and of valuable real estate, until he was numbered among the most prominent merchants of the place. After the territory had become part of the United States, Touro repeatedly exhibited his public spirit. During the defense of New Orleans by Andrew Jackson [during the War of 1812] he entered the ranks as a common soldier, and was severely wounded on Jan. 1, 1815, being given up for dead; but he was saved by the bravery and care of his friend Rezin Davis Shepherd, a young Virginian merchant, who had settled in the same city. Their friendship continued throughout their lives; and both of them amassed great fortunes.⁴

Rabbi [sic] Isaac Leeser was writing from personal observation when he reported on Touro's style of living and saving:

"Mr. T. was not a man of brilliant mind; on the contrary, he was slow, and not given to bursts of enthusiasm, as little as he was fond of hazardous speculations; and he used to say that he could only be said to have saved a fortune by strict economy, while others had spent one by their liberal expenditures ... he had no tastes for the wasteful outlay of means on enjoyments which he had no relish for. He [had] thus the best wines always by him, without drinking them himself; his table, whatever delicacies it bore, had only plain and simple food for him. ..."

Touro's wealth was not secured through commercial genius, or through skyrocketing profits, but gradually, through unremitting attention to his work, and through strict economies in his personal life. Perhaps he was always haunted by the private fear of a repetition of the penury in which his early years had been spent, when first his family existed on the meager dole provided by the British army, and when later he himself had to live on his uncle's charity.

Perhaps, too, it was his homeless childhood which led him to invest most of his savings in real estate. By 1812, he had already purchased a tract of land eighteen leagues below New Orleans. His earliest acquisition of a lot and building in the city itself which we have been able to discover in the notarial records took place

in 1818. Property which he bought in 1821 was still among his holdings when he died. Confident in the future of New Orleans, he purchased lot after lot, virtually all in the commercial center of the city, paid cash, erected buildings, and collected rents. He appears not to have mortgaged any of his property; hence he was unaffected by the periodic economic slumps and panics which at one time or another drove most of New Orleans' businessmen into bankruptcy. Almost three-quarters of the assessed value of his estate was invested in these properties and buildings which he had bought and developed over the long years. He had indeed, as Leeser reported, "saved a fortune," and it in turn increased in real value because the growth of New Orleans continued throughout the years. His net assets continued to increase, because he never retired from business activity.⁵

Judah Touro became a benefactor to all sorts of causes. "His charities knew neither race nor creed, and his public spirit was no less noteworthy. To Amos Lawrence and Judah Touro belongs the credit of supplying the funds for completing the Bunker Hill Monument, each subscribing \$10,000 for the purpose. Another object of his generosity was his native city of Newport. In 1842 he improved the enclosures of the old Jewish cemetery immortalized by Longfellow; and it was his money which purchased the Old Stone Mill supposed to have been built by the Norsemen, Touro's desire being that the historic landmark and the surrounding grounds might be saved for the town. The grounds in which the mill is situated are still known as Touro Park."⁶

Almost No Jewish Involvement

Interestingly enough, Judah Touro showed virtually no interest in anything Jewish during the first years of his residence in New Orleans.

Far from having been an avid leader and participant in Jewish life and Jewish causes in New Orleans from the earliest years of Jewish communal organization in the city, Touro appears on only two occasions prior to 1847 to have taken even the slightest interest in the life of his fellow Jews.

His first expression of interest was in 1828 when Jacob S. Solis of New York organized the first New Orleans congregation, "The Israelite Congregation of Shanarai-Chasset," and Touro was listed (mistakenly as "J. Turo") not as a member of the congregation, but as one of "the Israelite Donors, who are not members of the Congregation."

The fact that Touro would not consent to join this first congregation in the city where he had probably been the first Jew to establish permanent residence is astonishing.⁷

Yet, beginning in about 1845 Judah Touro became more and more involved in Jewish life and eventually became a strict Shomer Shabbos. Two men were responsible for Touro's "return to Judaism" – Gershom Kursheedt and Isaac Leeser.

To be continued.

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 **Ibid.**

³ **The Early Jews of New Orleans** by Bertram Wallace Korn, American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, MA, 1969, page 76.

⁴ **Touro, Judah, The Jewish Encyclopedia.**

⁵ **The Early Jews of New Orleans**, pages 82 – 83.

⁶ **Touro, Judah, The Jewish Encyclopedia.**

⁷ **A Reappraisal of Judah Touro**, by Bertram W. Korn, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 45, 1955, page 570.