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## Sir Moses Montefiore: A Brief History

by [Rabbi Menachem Levine](#)

**He was a protector of the Jewish People and builder of the Land of Israel.**

A world-famous personality, Sir Moses Montefiore was highly respected both in his native England and abroad. Until today, his name continues to be mentioned among his people with admiration and love. For the Jews of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, he was known simply as “The Protector.”

Sir Moses Montefiore, was born on the October 24, 1784 in the Italian city of Livorno (Leghorn). His grandfather and namesake, Moses Chaim Montefiore was a Sephardic Jew from that city, who later settled in London. On his mother’s side, Sir Moses traced his lineage back to Jews exiled by the Spanish Expulsion.



Young Moses became a member of the London Stock Exchange at a time when there were only 12 licensed Jewish brokers in all of England. In a matter of a few years, he amassed great wealth and became a member of the London Aristocracy. In 1812, he married his wife Judith Barent Cohen. Her sister was married to Reb Nathan Meyer Rothschild, known as one of the wealthiest people in the world at the time. Sir Moses eventually became the stockbroker for his brother-in-law. As a result of this successful partnership, they both amassed a tremendous fortune.

He was always an observant Jew, yet as the years passed, Moses and Judith grew together in their passion and devotion to Judaism. In 1827, he and [Judith](#) embarked on a long and arduous trip to Palestine, which was part of the Ottoman Empire at the time.

That trip changed him forever.

## From Fashionable Gentleman to Devout Jew

According to historian Abigail Green, a distant relative and author of *Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*, "[Montefiore](#) had spent the past 10 years refashioning himself as an English gentleman; he now shaped himself consciously as a practicing Jew."

Following his trip to Palestine, he vowed to dedicate more time to the welfare of the poor and to attend the synagogue three times a week, and he did so. Two years later, he petitioned the authorities for permission to emblazon "Jerusalem and Lion of Judah" to his coat of arms.



*Montefiore estate in Ramsgate*

In 1831, he bought a 24-acre estate in Ramsgate, a town by the sea in the South of England. On his estate, he built a synagogue and a replica of the biblical Rachel's tomb. Nationally, Montefiore gained increasing honor and recognition in his native England, roles he would use in defending and protecting his people.

## Connection to Land of Israel

"Moses Montefiore loved Jerusalem, lived for Jerusalem, and even made it our family motto. A Zionist before the word was invented, he believed in the sacred idea of Jewish return as a religious Jew's duty, and in Jewish statehood," said Simon Sebag Montefiore.

Sir Moses travelled to Palestine a total of seven times, the last time at the age of 91. His actions in Palestine are seen as laying the groundwork for the established settlement of Jews in Israel and the development of early Zionism.

He used his position as president of the Board of Deputies of British to carry on a notable correspondence with Charles Henry Churchill, the British Consul in Damascus, concerning the resettlement of Jews. He commissioned censuses of the Jewish community in Palestine in 1839, '49, '55, '66 and '75, thus furnishing a wealth of information that is still of value today.





*Montefiore windmill in Yemin Moshe*

His acts of philanthropy in building the Jewish settlement in the Holy Land are numerous. As the designated executor of Judah Touro's will, he decided to use the estate to fund projects of Jewish residential settlement in Eretz Yisrael. He purchased an orchard in 1855 on the outskirts of Jaffa to offer agricultural training to Jews. On the occasion of his ninetieth birthday in 1874, he established a fund that was instrumental in facilitating Hovevei Zion settlements in Palestine. He funded the very first Jewish residential settlement outside the walled city in Jerusalem, known as Mishkenot Sha'ananim. He also financed several agricultural colonies, a textile factory, and a printing press. Undoubtedly, his best-known project is the Montefiore Windmill, built in Yemin Moshe, to provide cheap flour to the poor. It operated for about nineteen years and is today a beloved landmark.

## **Proud and Observant Jew**

When he was appointed as Sheriff of London, Sir Moses specifically wrote in his contract that he would be absolved from working on Shabbos and Yom Tov. He also specified that he was to be absolved from entering a Church on non-Jewish holidays. Even when he was traveling, he endeavored to travel with an entourage of at least 10 Jews to ensure that he would have a minyan. He would take one of the many Torah scrolls that he owned along with him, as well as his personal Shochet, (ritual slaughterer). He would insist on bringing his own dishes and food to banquets so that he could eat kosher food.

Montefiore, was once seated at dinner next to an important personality and an anti-Semite, who told him he had just returned from Japan where they "have neither pigs nor Jews." Montefiore replied instantly: "Accordingly, you and I should go there so they can have a sample of each."

## **Defender of the Jews**

By middle age, Montefiore was determined to devote himself to his true calling: the rescue of Jews and Judaism from persecution and poverty across much of the globe.

He cared for the individuals and the masses. In 1840, he prevailed upon the Sultan of Turkey to liberate ten Syrian Jews who had been jailed in Damascus for a blood libel. In 1846, he traveled to Russia, succeeding in getting the Czar to rescind the decree of expulsion against Jews from the border areas of Russian Poland. In 1858, he travelled to Rome to try and free the Jewish youth Edgar Mortara, baptized by his Catholic nurse and kidnapped by church functionaries. He also protested persecution of Jews of Morocco in 1864, of Romania in 1867, and again in Russia, in 1872. He was renowned as the champion of East European Diaspora Jewry.

## A Light unto the Nations

Jewish philanthropy was his primary, though not his only, interest. Recognizing the evils of slavery, Sir Moses campaigned for its abolition in England. Incredibly, in 1835, he and the Rothschild family raised a government loan that made possible the abolition of slavery in the British Empire by using the funds to compensate plantation owners.



*Graves of Sir Moses and Lady Judith Montefiore*

Montefiore died at over one hundred years old. Though he had no children, his legacy lives on in the good deeds he performed over the course of his lifetime. He remains an eternal example of a proud and devout Jew, a defender of Jews, a supporter of the Land of Israel, and a person who used his money and power in order to do good for his people and humanity.

It has been told that Queen Victoria once asked Sir Moses Montefiore, "Sir Moses, what is the extent of your wealth? How much do you own?"

Sir Moses responded that it would take a few days to do some accounting, and then he would have an answer for her. He came back within a few days with a reply. Queen Victoria was upset when he stated a number, commenting, "This is offensive: Everyone knows that you have far greater wealth."

Sir Moses responded, "Your majesty, my only true wealth is money that I have given to charity. Anything else I possess is merely temporary and may someday be lost or confiscated."



*Synagogue in Ramsgate*

In Ramsgate, today one can visit the famous Montefiore Museum, and nearby is the synagogue that he built almost 200 years ago. Next to the synagogue there is a tomb, an exact copy of Mother Rachel's Tomb, containing the graves of Moses Montefiore and his wife Judith. A yeshiva which was established near his gravesite upon his death continues, and the ten Torah scholars who learn there continue to be supported by a fund he created especially for that purpose.

May his life continue to be an inspiration and his memory be for a blessing.

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