

*Memoir of the Late Isaac D'Israeli*

DESCENDED from a line of Jewish merchants who had dwelt in the "Home of the Ocean" during the proud days when Venice remained, at least in name, the queen of the Adriatic, the father of the late Mr. Isaac D'Israeli brought with him to England a store of historical associations and traditions meet nurture for "a poetic child," and equally calculated to incite the imaginative to realise their conceptions in romantic fiction, and the inquisitive to ascertain their realities by sober investigation. About the time that the first D'Israeli settled in England, the country was convulsed by one of those popular alarms, the result of combined fraud and fanaticism which appear like periodical visitations in our history. A law for the naturalization of the Jews had been passed with little opposition by both houses of parliament, and had received the ready support of the most distinguished prelates on the episcopal bench. An alarm for the church and for religion was however produced among the inferior clergy, and principally, as Walpole assures us, among the "country parsons." The alarm was as senseless and the cry as absurd as on the occasion of Dr. Sacheverell's trial, when a very stupid and very malevolent sermon was sufficient to set the whole country in a flame. It was proclaimed from

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countless pulpits that, if the Jews were naturalized in Britain, the country became liable to the curses pronounced by prophecy against Jerusalem and the Holy Land. The logic of this argument is of course as defective as its charity, but the multitude is liable to be deluded by confident and repeated assertion; it also happened that at the time suspicions were entertained of hostile designs from France, and though the Jews could not be associated with the French by any show of reason, they were linked to the enemy by a very tolerable rhyme. Every dead wall in the kingdom exhibited in varied orthography the delectable couplet,

No Jews,  
No wooden shoes.

Some of the bishops, adopted towards their insubordinate curates the same course that indiscreet parents employ to lull the tumults of the nursery when they proffer cakes as a bribe to stop crying. They resolved that it would be wise to make some concessions to clamour, and they joined in a representation to the minister which set forth that they by no means vouched for the truth of the popular calumnies directed against the Jews, that they had not even examined the evidence

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on which such tales of scandal were founded, but that believing the recent law to be offensive and alarming to many of your good sort of people, they recommended the premier to undo his own act, and to repeal the obnoxious law as early as possible. The Duke of Newcastle, who then held the office of prime minister, had none of the firmness of the late Sir Robert Peel or Earl Russell: he yielded to the clamour, partly from natural timidity, and partly because being raised at the close of a Parliament, he was afraid of its effects at a general election.

Twelve years after this strange exhibition of popular delusion and ministerial weakness, Isaac D'Israeli was born at Enfield in the month of May, 1766. But though the Jewish Naturalization Bill had been repealed, the passions and prejudices to which it gave vigour did not subside for nearly half a century; indeed the Jews narrowly escaped being involved with the Roman Catholics in the outrages perpetrated by the Protestant mob of Lord George Gordon. The accounts which he heard in childhood of the calumnies levelled against his name and nation, and of the political disabilities to which his family continued subject because an imbecile minister had neither the sense nor the courage to withstand popular delusion and popular clamour, produced an effect

on Mr. D'Israeli's mind which influenced his whole literary career. So far from adopting the aphorism *vox populi vox Dei*, he would much sooner have said *vox populi vox diaboli*; the very prevalence of any sentiment or opinion would with him have been a reason for viewing it with suspicion.

All the traditions of his race and all the reminiscences of his family tended to strengthen such a feeling. The people had no voice in the Hebrew commonwealth; law was dictated to them by the inspired prophet, the consecrated priest, or the anointed king; authority was not only the basis of their social order, but it entered into the minute detail of all their institutions; that confession of faith which every believing child of Abraham learns to lisp in his cradle commences with a divine demand for implicit submission and obedience. "Hear, o Israel," is not the beginning of a creed suited to the partisans of a democracy.

The traditions of Venice were equally calculated to alienate Isaac D'Israeli's mind from the parties and the opinions that found favour with the populace. Aristotle mentions some ancient oligarchy, the members of which, on admission to office, bound themselves by an oath to do all the injury to the democracy in their power. Although the senators of Venice did not swear to the

performance of any such obligation they adopted the same course by a design infinitely more binding than all the tests that human ingenuity could devise. Their first principle of government was at a mob was a restrained and caged tiger, and that, on any relaxation of these checks and restraints, the animal would spring at the throats of his keepers.

It is curious to observe how general and how influential these feelings were at the close of the last century. In spite of the proclamation of "Free and equal rights to all men," by the republicans of France, the Jews throughout Europe almost universally adhered to the cause of monarchy and social order. If they were not absolutely Tories they were at least very strenuous Conservatives; as men they loved "liberty," but as the sons of a privileged race they suspected "equality," and as a peculiar people they shrunk from "fraternity." Another reason for this was probably the horror with which they were inspired by the daring blasphemies of the atheists of France. Revolting as these excesses were to every man of right feeling, they filled the mind of the Jew with a horror perfectly indescribable, and to men of other creeds and races quite inconceivable. For, the Jew is the most religious of men; to him the Supreme

Being is not merely the Sovereign of the universe, but also and more especially the Tutelary Deity of his race, "the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob," The insanity which would dethrone Jehovah, the God of Israel, and erect, amid drunken and frantic orgies, an altar to the goddess of reason, was in his eyes at once the most atrocious of crimes and the greatest of personal insults. Hence, during the wars of the Coalition against revolutionary France, no soldiers fought with more desperate energies against the republican armies than the Jewish regiments in the service of Prussia; no moneyed men were more eager to support Pitt by subscribing to loans than the Jewish capitalists of London; and no commercial body evinced such sympathy for the fallen fortunes of Austria as the Jewish bankers and merchants of Germany. These predilections for monarchy and subordination of classes are still characteristic of the race; more than one pamphleteer, indeed, has stigmatized the Jews as inveterate partisans of despotism and aristocracy.

It is hardly necessary to say that there was but a very scant share of sympathy between the French and the Venetian republics. Indeed they were founded on such antagonistic principles that collision was inevitable

whenever they were brought into contact. Hence Napoleon, who retained many of his old principles as a Jacobin, long after he had ceased to be a republican, never spoke of the Venetian State but with abhorrence, and the only part of the proceedings of the Congress of Vienna on which he bestowed approbation was the decree which blotted the Venetian oligarchy from the list of the powers of Europe.

The philosophers who declare that “the child is the father of the man” do not mean that the whole of a man’s future character, conduct, and career are predestined and predetermined by any direct system of education; but they do mean that the appetencies and tendencies of his intellectual faculties are irresistibly moulded, formed, and directed by the atmosphere of moral influence which surrounds his childhood. It is for this reason that we have endeavoured to trace the influences most directly operative on the mind of the subject of this brief memoir, that we have directed attention to his alienation from the populace on account of the insult and injury legislatively inflicted on his race and family, a little before his birth, by a reluctant Ministry and an unwilling Parliament at the behest of senseless mobs, that we have examined the results likely to be produced by his theocratic creed and his Venetian descent.

Isaac D’Israeli, we are informed, received the greater part of his education at Leyden. He seems however in boyhood to have read a pretty extensive course of Hebrew and Rabbinical literature; judging merely from the internal evidences of his later writings, and particularly from his “*Portraiture of Judaism*,” a work of singular merit -which has fallen into unaccountable neglect, we should say that he was a diligent student of Maimonides, Aben Ezra, Manasseh Ben Israel, but more especially of Moses Mendelsohn. Like the last-named great man, whom, perhaps unintentionally, he seems to have taken for his model, D’Israeli chose to be purely a speculative philosopher, who never mingled in political broils, and who shunned all connection with political and religious parties. Hence, when he visited Paris in 1786, he escaped the influence of those passions which had been roused and stimulated by the revolution then impending, but devoted himself to the study of French literature with a zeal and ardour which continued with little abatement to almost the last hour of his life.

At no period of his life was D’Israeli a rabbinist or talmudist; a large and liberal philosophy raised him, as it did Mendelsohn, above all the exclusive, intolerant, and anti-social glosses with which the authors of the Mishna and Gemara have encumbered and distorted

the Mosaic legislation. He clung to the principles of the sublime and tolerant prayer offered by Solomon at the dedication of the Temple.

But this tolerance was not confined merely to philosophic opinion. Isaac D'Israeli, from the very commencement of his career, was a zealous advocate for every philanthropic plan by which the sufferings of humanity could be averted or alleviated. He adhered rigidly to those genuine principles of charity which are thus nobly enunciated by Rabbi Moses Ben Mizraim in his comment on the First Book of Kings:—"With respect to the *Goïm* (foreign nations or Gentiles), our fathers have commanded us to visit their sick and to bury their dead as the dead of Israel, and to relieve and maintain their poor as we do the poor of Israel, because of the ways of peace; as it is written, '*Elohim* (God) is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works.'" Psalm cxlv. 9.

It is certain that Isaac D'Israeli, though his parents had quitted the Jewish community, took a lively interest in the question of Jewish emancipation; but, save in the "Portraiture of Judaism," we are not aware of his having written directly on the subject. We know, however, that he spurned the common rabbinical no-

tion of a sudden and simultaneous elevation of the Jews to the highest rank of civilization and refinement. He believed that the restoration of the Jews to the rank of citizens and equal subjects would be accomplished by the gradual spread of knowledge and intelligence; and in this he agrees with the ancient Talmudists.

So early as his sixteenth year Mr. D'Israeli commenced his honourable career as an English author by addressing some verses to Dr. Johnson, whose High Church and Jacobite notions were closely in accordance with those of an admirer of the Hebrew theocracy. At a later period he published the oriental tale of "Mejnoun and Leila," the first eastern story written by a European in which the proprieties of costume and manner have received careful attention.

The work, however, by which the elder D'Israeli will always be best known, because it is the work which has made the deepest impression on the mind of the age, is the "Curiosities of Literature." It was the first revelation to the English people that they possessed materials for historical and critical investigations hardly inferior in value to the celebrated Memoirs of the French; and it was also one of the earliest attempts to vindicate the memory of the Stuarts, but more especially the: first

James and the first Charles, from the odium which had been accumulated upon them ever since the revolution. More than one of the Waverley Novels was obviously suggested by the "Curiosities of Literature;" and to that work our modern writers of historical romance have been far more deeply indebted than they have ever yet acknowledged.

The "Quarrels of Authors," the "Calamities of Authors," and the "Illustrations of the Literary Character," though more immediately connected with literary history, are everywhere marked with the characteristic feelings and sentiments which rendered the author an earnest advocate and zealous pleader for the hapless house of Stuart.

It was D'Israeli's review of Spence's "Anecdotes" in the "Quarterly," which gave rise to the great Pope controversy, in which Mr. Bowles, Lord Byron, Mr. Campbell, and others took a part. The reviewer's vindication of the moral and poetical character of Pope evinces great earnestness and conviction: he writes not as an advocate stating a case, but as a warm-hearted judge, who, having carefully investigated all the evidence, has unconsciously become a partisan while summing up the case. But we suspect that Pope was not the prin-

cipal person in the writer's mind while preparing this article: we think that from beginning to end he was mainly intent on a vindication of Bolingbroke, that misrepresented statesman and misapprehended genius, to whom the younger D'Israeli has had the courage to do justice. Bayle and Bolingbroke have been especial favourites with both the D'Israelis; the father as a scholar clinging closer to the former, the latter as a politician dwelling more emphatically on the latter. If in the elder D'Israeli's volumes of literary history we find Bayle's multifarious reading, his philosophic spirit of speculation, his contempt for merely popular opinion, and a very appreciable tendency to paradox; so in the younger we find the ideal of Bolingbroke more or less pervading the heroes of his political romances. Vivian Grey is a Bolingbroke in those early days of his political intrigues, when, with a boyish spirit of malice, he overturned the political combinations which he had toiled to accomplish, from mere caprice or from sheer love of mischief; and Coningsby is what Bolingbroke would have been had he set himself up as a patriot minister for his own ideality of a patriot king.

Now this admiration of Bolingbroke arises chiefly, but not wholly, from the Venetian cast of the charac-

ter of that statesman. Bolingbroke was essentially the statesman of an oligarchy; an admirable manager of a party, but the worst possible leader of a people. It may seem inconsistent to speak of the theocratic element in the mind of a reputed infidel; and yet the High Church sentiments of Bolingbroke cannot be questioned.

Isaac D'Israeli was one of the few men who lived exclusively for literature. Early placed in a position of independence, which rendered it unnecessary for him to adopt the commercial pursuits of his father, he indulged his taste, or rather his passion, for curious research, and never was satisfied in the investigation of any question until he had examined the original authorities. His writings and example have diffused a taste for historical inquiry and criticism, which has become, to a great extent, the prevalent characteristic of our age. In 1841 he was stricken with blindness, and though he submitted to an operation, his sight was not restored. He, the great American writer, Prescott, and Thierry, the author of the "History of the Conquest of England by the Normans" (who has published several considerable works since his blindness), are probably the only historical authors who have continued their labours in spite of so terrible a calamity. Aided by his daughter, he produced the "Amenities of Literature," and completed

the revision of his great work on the Reign of Charles I., which, on its first publication, had procured for him the degree of D.C.L, from the University of Oxford.

A cultivated and powerful memory enabled him, in the later years of his life, to pour forth the stores he had accumulated in his long and varied studies with a profusion as delightful as it was surprising. "The blind old man eloquent" was a description as applicable to him as to the bard of Scio. He felt that he had left an impress on his age and country; that he had enforced a more scrupulous attention to accuracy on its historians, and a more careful observance of character and costume on its writers of fiction. The dangers with which his favourite ideas of theocracy and nobility had been menaced by the wild theories to which the French Revolution gave birth, had long faded from his view, and he could look forward to a redemption of Israel consequent on a general advancement of enlightened principle and philosophic intelligence. *His work was done*; the great ideas which it had been his mission to develop were now unfolded more brilliantly, though perhaps not more efficaciously, by his son, who became the expounder of his most cherished sentiments, and more than the supporter of his dearly-earned fame. His own fame was thus enshrined in his son's reputation, and no

one could hereafter name either D'Israeli without feeling that as the one worthily led so the other worthily succeeded.

The death of Mr. D'Israeli took place in the eighty-second year of his age, at his country seat, Bradenham House, in Buckinghamshire, January 19th, 1848. He died a widower, having lost his wife, to whom he had been united for more than forty years, in the spring of 1847. One daughter and three sons survived him: his eldest son is too well known (wherever the English language is spoken) for us to say one word respecting his claims to celebrity.