

# A MEMORANDUM FROM THE RUSSIAN JEWS IN SAFED AND TIBERIAS TO SIR MOSES MONTEFIORE (1863)<sup>1</sup>

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In Albert M. Hyamson's invaluable reference work "The British Consulate in Jerusalem in relation to the Jews of Palestine 1838-1914"<sup>2</sup> a letter from Sir Moses Montefiore is quoted.<sup>3</sup> Montefiore was at that time President of the London committee of Deputies of the British Jews. The letter, written on 29 December 1863, is addressed to Earl Russell, the Foreign Secretary, and in this letter Montefiore mentions that he is enclosing a Memorial from the Jewish Communities in Safed and Tiberias, complaining about the deplorable condition in which they find themselves as a consequence of the withdrawal of British Protection which they had enjoyed during the preceding 10 years. In a footnote referring to this enclosure Hyamson states "not in volume or with the London Committee of Deputies".<sup>4</sup> However Hyamson quotes an entry from the Minutes of the London Committee of Deputies of British Jews, Meeting of the Board of 22 December 1863,<sup>5</sup> thus exactly one week before the date of Montefiore's letter, in which it is recorded that the above mentioned Memorial was read. It also notes that a letter was read dated 22 December 1863 from Mordecai Levy,<sup>6</sup> who had come to England as representative of the Memorialists (sic) and who also in person appeared before the Board, and there is no doubt that Levy was also the bearer of the Memorial from Palestine to Montefiore. The entry in the minutes concludes with the following (as quoted by Hyamson):

"Resolved that the Memorial be forwarded to Earl Russell, Secretary for Foreign Affairs, with a request that the British Government will be pleased to interfere on behalf of the Memorialists and place them again under its protection".<sup>7</sup>

A few years ago I had the opportunity to acquire a document which I have good reason to believe is the original Memorial which Hyamson was unable to locate.<sup>8</sup> It is an address to Sir Moses Montefiore, sent by the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbis of Safed and Tiberias in 1863. The address or memorial is written on the first page of a double-sheet of vellum-paper 66.5×40.5 cm (see illustration). Around three sides are quotations from Tanach, partly written in gold. In top center, under and between the three wavy lines with quotations, is a honorific introduction or ingress in rhymed verse. Thereafter follows the main text of the memorial.

Below follows a translation of these three components, rendering as faithfully as possible the extremely flowery language which is full of biblical quotations and formulations (for the translation of which I have used the Soncino Books of the Bible translation):

## QUOTATIONS AROUND THREE SIDES

A) In big black letters (straight lines) starting from lower right corner upwards, and continuing on left side downwards:



Thus saith the Lord: Keep ye justice, and do righteousness, for my salvation is near to come, and my favour to be revealed. Happy is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that holdeth fast by it" (Jes. 56:1-2)<sup>9</sup>

B) In big black letters on top (highest line) in form of arc:

And in all the mighty hand, and in all the great terror which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel (5 Mos 34:12)

C) Second line from top, in miniature golden letters (in form of a wavy arc) six different quotations:

Happy are they that keep justice, that do righteousness at all times (Ps. 106:3)

Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness (Jes. 1:27)

Happy is he that considereth the poor; the Lord will deliver him in the day of evil (Ps. 41:2)

A land which the Lord thy God careth for; the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year (5 Mos 11:12)

For thy servants take pleasure in her stones, and love her dust (Ps. 102:15)

I shall walk before the Lord in the lands of the living (Ps. 116:9)

D) Third line from top, in big golden letters (in form of a wavy arc):

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span (compare Jes. 40:12)

May he bring peace to him like a stream<sup>10</sup>

E) Fourth line from top, small golden letters (but slightly bigger than second line), in form of wavy arc:

The capital of the column,<sup>11</sup> for the cities of Israel splendor, pride and magnificence.

Who covers his pinions over the people of God and the flock of his pasture.<sup>12</sup>

He helps the poor, to keep alive the spirit of the humiliated, the oppressed poor.

Thy righteousness is like the mighty mountains,<sup>13</sup> people of Israel.

INGRESS (in rhymed verse), followed by main text

Who to us is greater than Moses/who can tell his great deeds/Lord of the land of Israel, the Holy Land/and the greatest in Israel/head of the exile of Ariel<sup>14</sup>/his righteousness is like the mighty mountains<sup>15</sup>/to keep alive a multitude of the people of Israel/...../who is a light to us/his righteousness has borne multiple fruits/he brought forth branches, and shot forth sprigs<sup>16</sup>: he is the honoured and exalted righteous, the man greatly beloved<sup>17</sup>/crowned with piety/ and he has ten shares<sup>18</sup>/of character and qualities/the famous and honoured MOSES MONTE-FIORE may you oh God protect him/and encompass him with favor as with a shield<sup>19</sup>/and let him ride upon the high places of success<sup>20</sup>/may the God of Abraham be to his help/and upon him shall his crown shine<sup>21</sup>/until to Zion will come the redeemer/soon in our days, Amen Selah.

When we with praise seize the beams of glory of His Excellency it is because we know that he has always taken part in our troubles, was saviour and defender<sup>22</sup> at times of our distress, and like a father who (in his son) delights,<sup>23</sup> we call him our father; therefore we had the impudence to trouble him time and again. WE BESEECH THEE SAVE NOW! For in the year 5609 His Excellency the Russian Consul General from Beyrouth sent an emissary here with an edict from H.M. the Czar of Russia stating that every subject of our big country had half a year's time to return to his country; and if they would not return they would leave his flag and protection. And another document stated that since he cared for his subjects and desired their welfare he gave permission to everyone under his jurisdiction to enter under (the protection of) other governments and powers according to their choice, so that his subjects should have the proper protection.<sup>24</sup> And when this emissary came here, we surrendered to him all our Russian passports, and we received from him a summary of the abovementioned Imperial

law in Russian language, signed by the above-mentioned Russian Consul General whom God may protect. And from that time onwards our whole community set their intentions and hopes on being accepted under the high flag, in the shadow of mercy and compassion for the benefit of the righteous, of the Government of England may it be exalted. And during that period arrived here H.E. the Consul Mr. Finn from Jerusalem (may it soon be rebuilt and restored) and gathered the whole community of Russian subjects under the English flag; and there were then in the holy City of Safed (may it be rebuilt and restored) about 250 and in the holy city Tiberias about 111 heads of households, and he wrote down their names and addresses and nationality, and the names of all members of their households, and he gave to each a signed document as proof. And the whole community rejoiced, and we blessed God who had thus steered the heart of the mighty Queen, and we lived in peace and quiet. And during that time the emissary of H.E. the Russian Consul returned, and brought with him letters of release (called "Kalasse") issued in the names of all individuals, explaining that this would increase the assurance that everybody would be accepted by whatever government he would choose; and since we already saw ourselves and our households assured of powerful protection by the most important government of all, and since the mentioned Consul Mr. Finn (may God protect him) had not asked this from us and had not called our attention at all to the subject of the mentioned letters of release, and since we besides relied on the document of H.M. the Czar of Russia which we had in our possession [a general release which did not require specification] the community did not pay attention to taking these release-letters from him, only a few took them, and the emissary went his way with the releases. But for the sake of our many sins peace did not last long, and the wheel was shattered<sup>25</sup> and the spectre returned, since after only few days had passed the Consul Mr. Finn (may God protect him) sent an edict from Jerusalem that everyone not in possession

of a written release (Kalasse) would be dismissed and expelled from his jurisdiction, and took back the confirmations and certificates from everyone who did not have a Kalasse, and there remained only a tiny number who had taken a Kalasse. And from then on we remained perplexed, prostrate and torn, exposed to defeat and suppression, and deeds of wickedness seek us daily, and heavily the yoke of Galuth (exile) lies upon us among the shameful, violent and wild Ishmaelites, affliction bound with humiliation. A VOICE IS HEARD IN RAMAH<sup>26</sup> IN LAMENTATION; THE VOICE IS THE VOICE OF JACOB,<sup>27</sup> the voice of the holy lambs, the voice of the blood of your brother cries out from the earth.<sup>28</sup> And when we had the privilege of the visit here of the great and exalted lord, the Prince of London<sup>29</sup> (may God protect him) we took pains to receive him with great honor, and handed him a letter of supplication concerning everything mentioned above. And he accepted it with love and devotion, and assured us for the good, but still we have not been helped. And as we see how big the pain is, we are sending His Honor, our good friend the eminent Rabbi and perfect Hacham, our teacher Rabbi Mordecai Halevy (may God protect him), and we gave him a letter to the mighty Queen, and we also gave him the summary of the document from H.M. the Czar of Russia which was in our possession. And we also gave him a list, signed by H.E. the consul Rogers, of the Russian persons who had obtained English protection. And for all this may our merciful lord stand up to our help, to the help of the lord against the mighty.<sup>30</sup> Yet the righteous holdeth on his way<sup>31</sup> to stand by us at the time of misfortune, so that we may be able to dwell on the holy ground, the land of our fathers in the service of God and his Torah; as it is our purpose that Moses may not hide his face<sup>32</sup> from us even by a hair's width. And what are we, but that we have come to tell but the tiniest part, and put before you just a portion of the multitude of our afflictions from the yoke of Galuth by the people surrounding us, who rejoice in deeds of wickedness, really our lives are

no life, and we are not qualified for the next world. And may our lord HOLD OUT to us the arm of his mercy, like God's great hand above him, to obtain for us a royal edict to return us under the flag of the exalted English government, so that we may be protected from the wild people who are the inhabitants of the country. And in his goodness and mercy may he befriend our honored friend, the above-mentioned rabbi who brings this letter, who has dedicated himself in God's name, for the benefit of the survival of the community, without any pay or compensation:

AND WE all, to us it is left to entreat and pray for his greatest success and prosperity, for a long life, in satisfaction and pleasure, until there stands up the priest with the Urim and Thummim.<sup>35</sup> These are the words of the supplicants who wish his peace and his welfare with all heart and soul, here in the holy cities Safed and Tiberias, may they be rebuilt and restored soon in our days, Amen. In the year "mighty to save"<sup>34</sup> [i.e. year 5623 according to numerical value ] signed by name:

Samuel Heller	Naftali Zvi from the holy city Tiberias
Pinchas Beharav	Mordecai Friedmann
Mordecai Segal	Nahum Menachem Mendel Avraham Yossef Halevi

Under the signatures of these rabbis are the seals of the "Holy Congregation of Ashkenazim Chassidim Kolel Volhynia in the holy city of Safed" (on the right), and on the left ditto from Tiberias. (Volhynia is a region of Russia, part of Ukraina, from where most of the Russian Jews in Safed and Tiberias at that time originated).

For a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding this Memorial the following background information may be of value:

During the first decades of the 19th century the Jewish population of Palestine can be estimated at less than 15,000, con-

centrated mainly in the holy cities Jerusalem, Tiberias, Safed and Hebron. According to Consul Finn, in 1853 the Jewish population of Jerusalem numbered about 10,000 persons, whereof about two-thirds Sefardim.<sup>35</sup> Not only did the Jews live in most abject poverty and under harsh suppression, but on top of all this the Ashkenazi Jews even had difficulties with their Sefardi brethren who considered themselves superior, and in fact even placed obstacles in the way of Ashkenazi immigration.

The British Consulate in Jerusalem was founded in 1838, and Lord Palmerstone's (then British Foreign Minister) direction to the first British Consul in Jerusalem was "to afford protection to the Jews generally".<sup>36</sup> Given the abysmal situation of the Jews in Palestine at that time, it is obvious that this direction gave ample scope of action to the Consul, the more so since although officially he could only act on behalf of persons under British protection, he should make it clear to the local authorities that the British government took an interest in the welfare of the Jews in general.

During the period 1830-1850 the number of Russian Jews in Palestine increased considerably, inspite of all restrictions imposed by the Czarist government on travels abroad. When one reads what Consul Finn writes about these circumstances, it is hard to realize that these words were not written today but more than 100 years ago:

"Even for leaving the country for brief periods, vexatious formalities and fees had to be submitted to by all classes of Russian subjects, and sureties were required to answer for the re-appearance of the travellers in order to satisfy the requisitions of taxes and military conscription, at the date written on the passport; and besides all these conditions when fulfilled, the license to travel abroad was discountenanced rather than encouraged."<sup>37</sup>

As Finn rightfully says, these restrictions were understandably felt most keen-

ly by the Jews, who however nevertheless succeeded to reach Palestine in increasing numbers, more often than not driven by nothing but the burning desire to be buried in the Holy Land. Finally the Russian Government decided to get rid of the troublesome responsibility involved in looking after people who never meant to return to Russia. As Finn describes it:

"It was, therefore, determined to set adrift all the Russian Jews then found in Palestine, furnishing them with papers of dismissal, which also allowed them to resort for protection to any European representatives they might think proper to select, but recommending the English Consulate. These papers were written in French and Arabic, and delivered by the Russian Vice-Consul in Jaffa".<sup>38</sup>

Finn mentions that this occurred in the year 1848. The above quoted Memorial to Sir Moses Montefiore mentions that it happened in the Jewish year 5609 which corresponds to the year 1849 but includes part of 1848. Finn goes on to describe the joy of the Russian-Jewish community who flocked to the British Consulate in great numbers (though for some reason or other a small minority chose Austrian protection), mentioning that "a register of names, dates etc of these proteges was duly kept in the consulate, the business of which was consequently much augmented".<sup>39</sup>

Finn's report thus fully confirms the facts mentioned in the Memorial about the majority of the Russian Jews in Safed and Tiberias having indeed obtained British protection. Somewhat later in his accounts, and describing the situation in 1854, Finn states:

"The Russian Jews — now, since 1850, British proteges — enjoyed, especially in Safed and Tiberias, a tranquillity to which they had long been strangers, and the Consulate was well seconded in regard to them by Mr. Rogers, the new Vice-Consul at Caifa, besides whom we had, from long pre-

vious years, as British Consular Agent at Acre, Mr. Finzi, who was a Jew".<sup>40</sup>

Incidentally, as Finn describes it in his memoirs, the Consulate tried whenever possible to help also those Jews not under British protection, including members of the Oriental community (Turkish subjects) to such an extent that the Consul (i.e. Finn) was often reproachfully called "half a Jew".

Already in a dispatch dated 20 November 1848<sup>41</sup> addressed to Viscount Palmerston, British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Colonel Rose, then British Consul General in Beyrouth, reports the intention of the Russian Government to deprive all Jews not wishing to return to Russia of their passports and citizenship, *and to put them under British protection*. In a dispatch to Viscount Palmerstone dated 23 March 1849<sup>42</sup> James Finn confirms the steps taken by the Russian representatives to deprive the Jews of their Russian papers and protection, except for those intending to return to Russia, however (as Finn writes):

"The Jews coming to this country never intend to return to Russia — they come here from an impulse of religious feeling, and are contented to drag out a life of extreme poverty, and to die here rather than return to Russia — especially as the military conscription involving duties so hostile to their religious observances of dress, food and Sabbath or other festivals, excites their utmost dread".

In the same dispatch Finn reports that a few days earlier a communication from the Russian Vice-Consul in Jaffa had been received by the Jews of that city, to be read in synagogues, outlining the above mentioned intentions and adding that in case of their failure to return to Russia within six months and paying their arrear taxes, "His Majesty's paternal care would provide them with sufficient protection by surrendering them to another power". Again to quote Finn:

"This last clause inspired great alarm, lest it should mean the Turkish dominion, whereupon the Rabbis of those Jews concerned held a conclave, and resolved not to read the Imperial message in the Synagogues for a week, but to consult me in the interim, as to:

1. Whether the Czar had power to deliver them over to the Turks?
2. Whether I was willing to accept under British protection those who had forfeited their Russian nationality".

To these questions Finn replied that the Czar had no power to deliver the Jews "in form" to the Turks, but as soon as they would be without European protection they would by necessity be subject to the laws of their country of residence. To the second question Finn answered that he was at liberty to receive Jews of European origin under British protection, unless the consul "to whom they had previously belonged" should give a valid reason against.

Finn states in this dispatch that at that time he had not yet received any communication from the numerous Jews in Safed and Tiberias on this subject. In fact, first in a dispatch of 24 November 1849<sup>43</sup> Finn reports to Palmerston that during his recent visit to Safed and Tiberias the Jews who had been formerly under Russian dominion unanimously petitioned him for British protection, "even some who had already paid a dollar each for Austrian protection joining in the petition". The petition list which Finn received comprised from Safed 465 persons belonging to 192 families, and from Tiberias 197 persons belonging to 63 families. These numbers appear to be considerably fewer than the 252 resp. 111 "heads of households" mentioned in the Memorial to Montefiore.

In the same dispatch Finn reports that of the Jews living in Jerusalem and Hebron 58 heads of households had deposited their Russian certificates of discharge (and in return received British certificates of reception, free of charge as Finn is at pains to point out). Apparently the remaining ex-Russian subjects took British protection for granted, in spite of not

having complied with the bureaucratic procedure of obtaining a written certificate of discharge or dismissal from the Russian Consul and depositing this certificate with the British Consulate.

In a further dispatch of 29 December 1849<sup>44</sup> Finn reports that the number of Russian-Jewish *families* who had voluntarily applied for and received certificates of British protection was as follows:

Jerusalem	98
Hebron	32
Safed	161
Tiberias	99
	390

No mention is made how many of these families surrendered Russian certificates of dismissal. In fact it appears that Finn, surely out of sympathy and concern for the Jews, acted with less regard for the necessary formalities than was called for, not only by existing procedures but in fact by interest for the Jews concerned. Thus in a dispatch of 29 April 1852<sup>45</sup> Finn reports reproaches from Mr. Basily, the Russian Consul General in Beyrouth, to the effect that Finn should not have taken under British protection any Russian Jews other than those who could produce a Russian certificate of dismissal, against which Finn contends that there was no reason for the Jews to apply for such certificates, since by their refusal to comply with Russian law they were automatically exempted from its jurisdiction.

Finn gives in his dispatch additional lengthy arguments as to why he accepted Russian Jews under British protection even if they could not show Russian certificates of dismissal. However the reply from the Foreign Office (Earl Malmsbury) dated 8 June 1852<sup>46</sup> was not what Finn had hoped for. Finn was told in plain words that he had acted wrongly and in conflict with existing directives. During that period Finn had correspondence also with Mr. Basily who maintained the view that even the lapse of more than three years since the Czar's edict had not annulled the necessity for ex-Russian Jews to

procure formal letters of dismissal before they could be admitted to British protection.

In consequence of his correspondence both with the Foreign Office as well as with Mr. Basily Finn had to inform the various Jewish Communities of the new situation which had arisen, which caused considerable panic, the more so since many Russian Jews did not even possess the necessary documents to prove that they had previously been under Russian jurisdiction and thereby obtain the certificates of release. In a dispatch two years later, of 23 March 1854 Finn again describes the plight of Jews who come to him for help and who could give ample proof of their Russian origin, but not in the way of legalistic formality required by the Russian Consulate, and therefore lacked all protection. Finn refers to a petition just received from Safed, signed by 79 heads of families.

According to Finn the number of heads of Jewish families under British protection at that time, "registered under *unexceptionable authorization*", was as follows:<sup>47</sup>

Jerusalem	190
Hebron	19
Safed	33
Tiberias	16
	258

Unfortunately Montefiore's efforts were not successful, nor did supportive letters like one from Baron Lionel de Rothschild to Earl Russell<sup>48</sup> have any effect. The Foreign Office maintained their viewpoint which they conveyed to Montefiore: "Mr. Finn acted erroneously in assuming from the beginning that British protection could be granted to Russian Jews without being able to show letters of release."<sup>49</sup> Some months later received also Baron Rothschild a note from the Foreign Office stating:

"Protection can be extended only if the person seeking British protection can produce a formal "letter of release" from the Russian Consulate confirming that Russian protection has been withdrawn from him, and that he would thus otherwise be left unprotected. Without production of such a letter Her Majesty's Consulate will not be authorized to extend British protection to such a person".<sup>50</sup>

## NOTES

1. This article appeared (in Hebrew) in *Zion, Quarterly for Research in Jewish History* published by The Historical Society of Israel, Vol. XLIX No. 4, 1984. The author expresses his thanks to Dr. Israel Bartal of the Dept. of Jewish History, Hebrew University Jerusalem, for translating this article to Hebrew and for his help with some footnotes.
2. A.M. Hyamson (ed.), *The British Consulate in Jerusalem in Relation to the Jews of Palestine 1838-1914*, I-II, London 1939-1941.
3. *Ibid.* II No. 232 pp. 315-317.
4. *Ibid.* p. 315.
5. *Ibid.* pp. 315-316.
6. *Ibid.* p. 316.
7. *Ibid.*
8. The handwritten document was part of a collection of mail sent from Safed during the last centuries. It was offered for sale at a public auction after the death of the collector. The document had been folded double with resulting ink-transfer in some places.
9. The last two words of this quotation are added in miniature letters at the left lower bottom of the quotation, due to spacing-reasons.
10. This is not a direct quotation from the Bible, but the picture of "peace like a stream" is taken from Jesaiah (see Jes. 66:12 and 48:18).
11. Meaning "the high point" or the most important part.
12. Expression of "covering with his pinions" taken from Ps. 91:4. Compare also 5 Mos. 32:11.
13. Ps. 36:7.
14. "Ariel" here referring to Jerusalem (see Jesaia 29:1, 2 and 7).



15. Ps. 36:7.
16. Ez. 17:6.
17. Daniel 10:11.
18. Can also be translated "ten-fold" (see Daniel 1:20).
19. See Ps. 5:13.
20. See Jes. 58:14.
21. Ps. 132:18.
22. Isaiah 19:20.
23. See Prov. 3:12.
24. See Isaiah 4:6.
25. Eccl. 12:6.
26. Jerem. 31:14.
27. Gen. 27:22.
28. *Ibid.* 4:10.
29. The Prince of Wales (see below No. 37).
30. Judges 5:23.
31. Job. 17:9.
32. See Deut. 31:18.
33. Ezra 2:63, Nehemiah 7:65.
34. Isaiah 63:1; numerical value of letters in quoted words is 623, i.e. year 5623 corresponding to most of year 1863 (including last months of 1862).
35. James Finn served as Her Majesty's consul at the British Consulate in Jerusalem during the years 1846–1863. Re the British Consulate in Jerusalem and its work on behalf of the Jewish population see: M. Werta, "Why the British Consulate in Jerusalem was established", *Zion* XXVI (1961) pp. 215–237; also M. Tannenbaum "The British Consulate in Jerusalem 1858–1890", *Cathedra* V (Tishri 5738) pp. 83–108.
36. James Finn, "Stirring Times, or Records from Jerusalem Consular Chronicles of 1853–1856", ed. by Elizabeth Finn, I–II, London 1878.
37. *Ibid.* p. 112.
38. *Ibid.* p. 113.
39. *Ibid.* pp. 113–114.
40. *Ibid.* II p. 57.
41. Hyamson I No. 68 p. 109.
42. *Ibid.* No. 71 pp. 110–112.
43. *Ibid.* No. 96 pp. 146–147.
44. *Ibid.* No. 105 p. 158.
45. *Ibid.* No. 133 pp. 187–192.
46. *Ibid.* No. 137 pp. 203–204.
47. *Ibid.* No. 160 p. 223.
48. Hyamson II No. 242 pp. 334–335.
49. *Ibid.* No. 235 pp. 326–327 (dated 1 February 1864).
50. *Ibid.* No. 244 p. 336 (dated 3 October 1864). The subject of granting of British protection by Finn contrary to directives is dealt with also in the article by Tannenbaum (see Note 22 above) pp. 102–103. The subject of the visit of the Prince of Wales in Palestine in 1862 and the criticism of Consul Finn's actions during his period of service are dealt with extensively in the one-sided treatise of Mrs. Finn of 1864. See also N. Shur "The Family of Consul Finn in Jerusalem — Last Years", *Cathedra* 30 (Tevet 5744) pp. 64–90.