Keywords

"Montefiore, Judith"

"Jewish women"

"Jewish press"

"Anglo-Jewry"

"Philanthropy"

“Jewish spirituality”

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Abstract

Judith Montefiore's life has attracted attention principally by association with that of her husband Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), the preeminent Jewish figure of his age. This article emphasises instead, her pioneering role as a Jewish woman travel-writer and influential female voice in the world of Jewish letters and international Jewish politics. To Jews in the Holy Cities of Palestine and the ghettos and shtetls of Eastern Europe, Judith was - like her husband - a beacon of hope, an example to follow and an instrument of change. Her activities drew on a rich vein of Jewish tradition and a series of profound encounters with Middle Eastern and, to a lesser extent, Eastern European Jewries, that shaped her spiritual world. These paradoxes are easily conceptualised by the contrast between Judith's different worlds: the Jewish world that underpinned her marriage, structured her spirituality and infused her life with meaning, and the world of the English gentry and dissenting middle classes, with whom she mixed socially, and whose spiritual style, values, expectations, and mode of life shaped her in other, equally profound ways. This article argues, however, that it was the interaction and cross-fertilization between these different worlds that enabled Judith to carve her distinctive path in life.

Spirituality, tradition and gender: Judith Montefiore, the very model of a modern Jewish woman

After her death, Lady Judith Montefiore (1784-1862) was fêted as the very model of Jewish womanhood.[1] Writing to his fiancée Golda Pines in 1870, the future historian and Zionist activist Ze'ev Javitz (1847-1924) expressed the wish that she might follow Judith's example in prayer, charity and devotion to her beloved.[2] His admiration was entirely consonant with contemporary opinion. The influential *Jewish Chronicle* described Judith as 'unique in the Jewish community': '[h]er piety was unfeigned, the attachment to her God and her people sincere, and her veneration for Israel's time-honoured customs and ancient usages profound... But her chief characteristic was the profound sympathy which she felt for all her husband's noble aspirations.'[3] Praising Judith's intelligence, cultivation, and musicality, the *Chronicle* recognised that her life experience was beyond the ordinary: her travels 'had greatly enlarged a mind naturally disposed to observe', and two of her journals had been anonymously published. Yet these achievements seemed less significant than the religious impulses that infused her life and home: 'Those who had the happiness to see in the domestic circle the animated countenance brightened up by a holy glow as she was lighting the Sabbath lamp or gracing the festive board on Passover Eve, will not easily forget the profound impression produced by this gentle, saintlike being, to which worship seemed to be its natural element'. Similar images suffused the funeral eulogy given by

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1. There is as yet no biography of Judith Montefiore. The best account remains Sonia L. Lipman, 'Judith Montefiore - First Lady of Anglo-Jewry' in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 21 (1968), 287–303.

2. Ze'ev Javitz to Golda Pines, 1870, Javitz Archives, Arc 4° 1602, Jewish National Library Archives. My thanks to Asaf Yedidya for sharing this letter with me.

3. 'Death of Lady Montefiore', in *The Jewish Chronicle and the Hebrew Observer*, no. 407 (3 October 1862), 5.

Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler (1803-1890), but Adler also described the childless Judith as 'a mother in Israel': '[h]ow often ... did she shed tears for the poor of Jerusalem, like Rachel weeping bitterly for her children, and poured out her soul before the Lord, praying that He might send His help from His sanctuary.' The tensions in these eulogies between the 'traditional' model of Jewish feminity, with its emphasis on the domestic role of a wife and mother, and the reality of Judith's experience as an infertile woman, whose literary and philanthropic activities helped to remake the conventions of Jewish womanhood in the modern era are palpable.

Judith's life has attracted attention principally by association with that of her husband Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), the preeminent Jewish figure of his age.[4] Born to a well-connected London Sephardi family, Montefiore made a fortune on the stock exchange during the Napoleonic era, thanks in part to his marriage to Judith, whose sister Hannah was the wife of Nathan Rothschild. He was a leading figure in the struggle for Anglo-Jewish emancipation during the 1830s and dominated Anglo-Jewry for the best part of fifty years. But Montefiore was propelled to international prominence by his 1840 intervention in the so-called Damascus Affair, which saw him travel with Judith to Alexandria in the wake of high-profile ritual murder allegations made against some of the most prominent Jews in Damascus.[5] After obtaining the release of the Jewish prisoners, Montefiore traveled on to Constantinople, where the Ottoman Sultan granted him a *firman* definitively overturning the charge of ritual murder and apparently promising equal treatment to Ottoman Jews. He subsequently became a kind of international trouble-shooter for the Jewish people, travelling twice to Russia (1846, 1871), once to Rome (1859), once to Morocco (1864) and once to Romania (1866) on high-profile missions designed to improve the lot of local Jews. Judith accompanied him on several of these missions, in addition to five of the seven trips he

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4. See above all Abigail Green, *Moses Montefiore: Jewish liberator, imperial hero* (Cambridge, 2010). Also Sonia L. Lipman and Vivian D. Lipman, ed., *The Century of Moses Montefiore* (Oxford, 1985).

5. Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: 'ritual murder,' politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge, 1997) provides a seminal account of these events.

made to Palestine between 1827 and 1875. Celebrated for his philanthropy, Montefiore was an innovator who grasped the potential of new forms of communication and association to pioneer mass subscription fundraising in the Jewish world. He appealed to a global public to support Jewish and occasionally non-Jewish emergency relief campaigns, with a particular focus on Palestine, where he sought to promote agricultural colonisation and productivization as early as 1839. His love for the Land of Israel was legendary, and in his twilight years the early Zionists raised money through sales of his portrait, which became the most pervasive secular Jewish icon of the nineteenth century. Back home in the Kentish port of Ramsgate, Montefiore's centennial birthday celebrations in 1884 captured the imagination of the world – attracting enthusiastic press coverage and birthday greetings from as far afield as Russia, New Zealand, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States.[6] Judith was long dead by this time, but accounts of her husband's achievements continually referred to her as his inspiration and 'beneficent genius'.[7] Montefiore himself endorsed this view. 'I am no great man', he famously remarked. 'The little good that I have accomplished, or rather that I intended to accomplish, I am indebted for it to my never-to-be-forgotten wife, whose enthusiasm for everything that is noble, and whose religiousness sustained me in my career.'[8]

In a sense, the *Jewish Chronicle* was right to assert that Judith's 'history only begins with her marriage' for 'the glorious history of Sir Moses is her own'.[9] This assessment - so redolent of its time - does not do justice to the nature of Judith's achievements. Of course they were inseparable from her husband's, in a way that was typical for British women of her class. But Judith was, in her own right, a

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6. For more detail see Green, *Moses Montefiore*, Chapter 19.

7. 'Death of Lady Montefiore'.

8. 'Pesth - Two days with Sir Moses Montefiore', *The Jewish Chronicle and the Hebrew Observer*, no. 444 (19 June 1863), 5.

9. 'Death of Lady Montefiore'.

pioneer. She was, in 1827, one of a handful of Western European women to have traveled to Palestine, and among even fewer to publish her experiences.[10] As a Jewish woman travel-writer and influential female voice in the world of Jewish letters and international Jewish politics, she was unique. Yet Judith does not feature prominently in the roll-call of early Anglo-Jewish women writers perhaps because - despite authoring the first Anglo-Jewish cookbook in 1846 - she was not primarily concerned with (re-)conceptualising Jewish identity in an English key.[11] While she put time and energy into supporting her husband's communal activities, there was nothing particularly distinctive about her willingness to join with other genteel ladies in locally-based charitable work.[12] The combination of religious duty, social obligation and domestic attachment that motivated her activities was very similar to that underpinning the activities of other British women from her social milieu, some of whom engaged in philanthropic and

10. Judith Montefiore, *Private journal of a visit to Egypt and Palestine* (London: Joseph Rickerby, 1836).

11. Judith Montefiore, *The Jewish manual; or practical information in Jewish and modern cookery, with a collection of valuable recipes & hints relating to the toilette. Edited by a lady* (London: T & W. Boone, 1846). For an analysis of this work see Sandra Sherman, 'The Politics of taste in the Jewish manual', in *Petit Propos Culinaires* 71 (November 2002), 72–95. On Anglo-Jewish women writers see Michael Galchinsky, *The Origin of the modern Jewish woman writer.romance and reform in Victorian England* (Detroit, 1996).

12. For context see F. K. Prochaska, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1980).

political activism that was equally international in scope.[13] Given the trans-denominational quality of much philanthropic activity, even her Jewishness did not really set her apart.[14]

To understand Judith's impact, we need to look beyond the wealthy Anglo-Jewish elite that was her natural element, and beyond the English-speaking culture in which she wrote, thought and acted. For her privately published 1839 travel diary became a landmark in international debates about the future of the impoverished Jewish community in Palestine, where she emerged as a significant philanthropic figure in her own right.[15] To Jews in the Holy Cities of Palestine and the ghettos and shtetls of Eastern Europe, Judith was - like her husband - a beacon of hope, an example to follow and an instrument of change. But the interaction between her world and theirs went both ways and in this too, Judith was different. Her activities drew on a rich vein of Jewish tradition and a series of profound encounters with Middle Eastern and, to a lesser extent, Eastern European Jewries, that shaped her spiritual world.

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13. See for instance Clare Midgley, *Women against slavery: the British Campaigns 1780–1870* (London, 1992); Anne Summers, 'British Women and Cultures of Internationalism, 1815–1914', in *Structures and transformations in Modern British history*, ed. David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (Cambridge, 2011), 187–209. More generally on the cross-fertilization between domestic and international moral reform movements see David Turley, *The Culture of English antislavery, 1780–1860* (London, Routledge, 1991).

14. This issue is discussed in Abigail Green, 'Rethinking Sir Moses Montefiore: religion, nationhood and international philanthropy in the nineteenth century', in *American Historical Review* 110 (2005), 631–58, as well as Green, *Montefiore*, Chapter 5.

15. Judith Montefiore, *Notes from a private journal of a visit to Egypt and Palestine, by way of Italy and the Mediterranean. Extracts from some of the reports, letters on agriculture in the Holy Land received by Sir Moses Montefiore* (London,1844).

These paradoxes are easily conceptualised by the contrast between Judith's different worlds: the Jewish world that underpinned her marriage, structured her spirituality and infused her life with meaning, and the world of the English gentry and dissenting middle classes, with whom she mixed socially, and whose spiritual style, values, expectations, and mode of life shaped her in other, equally profound ways. A closer reading of Judith's life suggests, however, that this would be overly simplistic. For, as I hope this article has demonstrated, her life and work were suffused by a spirituality that combined 'modern' and 'traditional' elements in such complex and unexpected ways that these terms lose all meaning as categories of analysis. Rather, it was the interaction and cross-fertilization between these different worlds that enabled Judith to carve her distinctive path in life.

What did it mean to be a Jewish woman of Judith's generation, and how far did her life break with established patterns?[16] Born into an observant but socially acculturated Ashkenazi family living in London, Judith's father Levi Barent Cohen (1740-1808), a prosperous Dutch merchant, was sufficiently well versed in Jewish law and connected to continental rabbinic networks to correspond with a learned rabbi in Prague about whether an observant Jew could open an umbrella on the Sabbath.[17] Proficient in German, French and Italian, as well as the piano, Judith received the kind of secular education that befitted an English girl of her social standing, but she could also read and translate correctly the Hebrew

16. For an introduction to the recent historiography on Jewish women see Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore, ed., *Gender and Jewish history* (Bloomington, 2010). Important contributions to this field include Paula Hyman, *Gender and assimilation in modern Jewish history:the roles and representation of women* (Washington: University of Washignton Press, 1995) and Marion A. Kaplan, *The making of the Jewish middle class. Women, family and identity in Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1991).

17. Lipman, 'Judith Montefiore', 82.

language of her prayers and the weekly Torah portion read on the Sabbath.[18] Her diaries reveal an easy familiarity with the Old Testament in English translation, but there are no hints of engagement with Talmudic or rabbinic texts. The world of her father's Jewish learning was seemingly closed to her, and the mismatch between her secular attainments and her Jewish education was probably typical for a girl born into the Anglo-Jewish elite.[19] It reflected the fundamental imbalance in religiously assigned gender roles that rendered the synagogue a male preserve and reduced the number of religious obligations (*mitzvot*) enjoined upon women to three, all of which were rooted in the home: the lighting of candles, the baking of sabbath bread and the laws of ritual purity related to menstruation.

But absence of Jewish learning was by no means equivalent to an absence of Jewish religious culture. Indeed, Judith consciously embraced this vision of a religiously defined domestic role. The first Friday after her wedding in 1812, she felt a pious sense of occasion at fulfilling her duties as a Jewish wife: 'on lighting the candles in the evening with my mother, according to her wish and what is taught us, I experienced a new sense of devotion and solicitude to act right. I trust that God Almighty will direct us how to perform that which is most pleasing to him.'[20] This understanding of her role resonated in obvious ways with the ideology of separate spheres that emerged in early nineteenth century Britain, with the concomittant cult of domesticity and with the connections this forged between family and religious

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18. Louis Loewe, ed., *Diaries of Sir Moses and Lady Montefiore, comprising their life and work as recorded in their diaries from 1812 to 1883*, vol. 1 (London,1890), 4.

19. By analogy with the situation outlined in Hyman, *Gender and assimilation*, Chapter 2, and Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish women: marginality and modernization in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish society*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Lebanon, 2004).

20. Journal entry, June 12, 1812 in Lucien Wolf, 'Lady Montefiore's Honeymoon,' in *Essays in Jewish history*, ed. Cecil Roth (London,1934), 233–58.

sentiment in the public imagination.[21] Indeed the references to Sabbath-candle lighting in Judith's obituaries underline the centrality of this ritual in contemporary ideals of Jewish womanhood. Yet the impression these obituaries give of Judith's exemplary adherence to Jewish female norms obscure the ways in which the vagaries of her life precluded her from fulfilling them.

Judith was barren, and motherhood is regarded as such a central attribute of Jewish marriage that infertility over a period of ten years is grounds for divorce under Jewish law.[22] While fertility was a blessing from God, infertility was widely regarded as a punishment for sin - a punishment that could be averted through prayer and good works. By describing Judith as a 'mother in Israel', Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler sought to gloss over this aspect of her life.[23] Needless to say, the Montefiores could not, and it is hard not to read their philanthropy in part in these traditional terms. 'Never man had better Wife or one more worthy of her husband's Affections & esteem, she was ever kind virtuous & charitable, pious & by her example stimulated her Partner to follow the precepts of her honored Parent', wrote Montefiore to Judith in a letter to be opened after his death. He reaffirmed the statement four times between 1824 and 1835, by which time the couple were fifty and all thought of offspring was clearly out of the question. This must have been heartbreaking for Judith, but infertility also created new opportunities. Her ability to travel with her husband and to share in his public endeavours was greatly facilitated by her childless condition. Had she been the wife and mother of Jewish tradition, she would surely have stayed at home.

Here, it is important to distinguish between the early trips the couple took together - touristic excursions that typically combined business with pleasure, and often involved non-Jewish traveling

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21. For an overview of recent literature in this area see Anne Summers, *Female lives, moral states. Women, religion and public life in Britain 1800–1930* (Newbury, 2000), Chapter 1.

22. See the discussion in Michele Klein, *A Time to be born. Customs and folklore of Jewish birth* (Philadelphia, 2000), Chapter 1.

23. 'Death of Lady Montefiore'.

companions - and their first visit to Palestine in 1827. The sights of Europe were an entirely conventional destination for a wealthy British middle class couple with time to spare; Palestine was not. Montefiore, moreover, was attracted not by the lure of the exotic, but by a religious yearning to see the Land of Israel for himself. In this, he demonstrated his affinity with a tradition of pilgrimage to Palestine that became well-established amongst the Sephardic Jews of the Mediterranean during the eighteenth century.[24] Boats full of Jewish pilgrims often left for Jaffa from Montefiore's birthplace Livorno, and he had been both moved and inspired by the sight of such a ship leaving the harbour.[25] Coming as she did from a different kind of Jewish background, Judith did not feel the same sense of connection.

Reading the first part of her travel diary, there is no sense of Judith as anything other than a cultured, British tourist wending her way through France and Italy to Rome, Naples and Malta, where she socialised with members of the small British colony: sightseeing, attending formal dinners, exchanging morning calls with Governor and Lady Ponsonby, and inspecting local charitable institutions. But, as Judith Page has argued, 'by the time [Judith] Montefiore arrived in Palestine, the journal had become a vehicle for meditating on theological issues, and for acknowledging her personal sense of blessedness before God.'[26] And Page emphasises the distinctive Jewishness of Judith's text as she nears the Holy City, the way she 'relies on Jewish interpretations of memory and community to structure her encounter with the ruins of Jerusalem', and the way she repeatedly draws connections between what she sees, her

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24. See Jacob Barnai, *The Jews in Palestine in the eighteenth century under the patronage of the Istanbul Committee of Officials for Palestine*, trans. Naomi Goldblum, Judaic Studies Series (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1992), 27–33.

25. Sonia L. Lipman, 'The making of a Victorian gentleman', in *The Century of Moses Montefiore*, ed. Sonia L. Lipman and Vivian D. Lipman (Oxford, 1985), 15.

26. Judith W. Page, 'Jerusalem and Jewish memory: Judith Montefiore's 'Private Journal', in *Victorian literature and culture* 27(1999), 271.

spiritual life and the history of the Jewish people. But while correctly appreciating the 1827 pilgrimage as a moment of spiritual revelation for Judith which shaped her future path in life - a revelation inspired by her contact with holy places - Page fails to consider the impact of Judith's encounters with Jewish ritual and worship beyond the European world.

As we have seen, Jewish women were released from most ritual obligations under Jewish law and did not play a prominent part in public worship. If they attended synagogue, women like Judith habitually sat in a ladies' gallery, where they were free to gossip and chatter as they saw fit. But Judith's diary and other sources suggest that her own behaviour in synagogue and attitude to public worship was more in keeping with the devout religiosity of the kind of non-conformist and Evangelical English women with whom she mixed socially, than with Jewish devotional norms. Attending synagogue in Alexandria in 1827, Judith sat in the ladies' gallery with Mrs Fua, the wife of a prominent member of the local Italian Jewish community, and two other ladies. 'I cannot say much of their devotion,' she wrote in her diary, 'conversation having been more attended to than prayers. The gentlemen here tell me, it is not considered essential for ladies to observe that strict piety which is required of themselves; but surely at a place of devotion the mind ought to testify due respect and gratitude towards the Omnipotent.'[27] Her impressions of the ladies' gallery in Florence a decade later were remarkably similar: '[s]everal German females were present, and they wished to be very conversant; but I, as usual at a place of devotion, was as resolved to be taciturn.'[28] Back in England, meanwhile, she regularly accompanied her husband to their little private synagogue in Ramsgate - not just on Sabbath mornings, but for the afternoon and evening service, and

27. Sunday, September 30th, 1827, Alexandria. Montefiore, *Private Journal*, 173–74.

28. 'Saturday, February 2, Florence, Travel diary of Judith Montefiore, 1838–1839', MS. Var 3/1–2 (Jewish National Library Archives, Jerusalem, 1839). [Henceforth JMTD 1839]

even during the week as well.[29] She demonstrated the synagogue's place at the heart of her marriage when she gave up the wedding dress she had cherished for two decades to make a Torah mantel and altar cloth (*parochet*).[30] Such dresses were often passed from mother to daughter, but might be given up for ritual purposes at symbolic moments, for instance to commemorate an untimely death in the female line.[31] For Judith, the gift of her wedding dress marked the end of her hopes of motherhood, and – perhaps – the ways in which observing Jewish customs associated with marriage, death and fertility helped her to come to terms with her loss.

Such intensive piety went beyond the conventional. Jewish women could be devout, but the synagogue was not necessarily a focus for their religious practice in the way that church-going was for their Christian counterparts. The status of Jewish women in liturgy, law and custom was already the subject of criticism within acculturated Western European circles, since it sat uneasily with bourgeois perceptions of female spirituality and with the preoccupation of Jewish religious reformers with what Michael Meyer has termed 'the subjective influence of ritual performance'.[32] Judith's behaviour and her

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29. Rev. D. A. Jessurun Cardozo and Paul Goodman, *Think and thank, the Montefiore synagogue and college, Ramsgate*. (Oxford, 1933), 43.

30. For an image of the Torah mantel see http://www.montefioreendowment.org.uk/collections/view/?id=02766

31. I am grateful to Tzameret-Rivka Avivi for sending me a detailed account of how this practice was observed in early 20th century Palestine by members of the Aburbeh family, which was of Spanish-Moroccan origin. For more information on the observance of this practice in her family see http://www.tapuz.co.il/blog/net/ViewEntry.aspx?entryId=1612105&skip=1 ; also http://israelitombstones.blogspot.co.il/2013_09_01_archive.html

32. Michael A. Meyer, 'Women in the thought and practice of the European Jewish reform movement', in *Gender and Jewish history*, ed. Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore (Bloomington, 2011), 140.

concern with decorum during religious services suggests a sensitivity to at least some of the reformers' concerns. Yet unlike her contemporaries Grace Aguilar and Charlotte Montefiore, two Anglo-Jewish women writers from the London Sephardi community whose literary activity was inspired by their Jewishness, Judith never embraced the reform movement. Instead, she combined her English devotional style with a range of Jewish religious experiences that were quite simply beyond the reach of most of her immediate social circle, and had nothing in common with English Christian forms. Judith's spiritual experiences in Palestine were, I would argue, as critical in preventing her from embracing the reform movement as her husband's rigid resistance to it - a resistance that was quite unexpected given his support for anglicising religious practice during the 1830s.[33] Her contact with the world of Jewish spirituality in the East gave her a profound connection to Jewish tradition. It was precisely this connection that enabled her to serve as a new kind of female role-model to men like Javitz and women like Golda Pines, whose experience was confined to this traditional world.

The first, and perhaps the most profound, of Judith's spiritual experiences in the East took place at the Tomb of Rachel during Judith's first trip to Palestine in 1827. Despite months of travel, the tensions in the Mediterranean precipitated by the Greek revolt prevented the Montefiores from spending longer than three days in Jerusalem. Her husband spent the second of these days touring Jewish holy places and houses of study, which Judith could not easily have visited as a woman. Instead, she set out on a day trip to Bethlehem, visiting the Tomb of Rachel in the company of a group of Jewish women. This crumbling ruin was a holy site for all Jews, but for an infertile woman like Judith it may have had special significance. For Rachel - elevated in Jewish tradition above the other three biblical matriarchs as the 'Mother of Israel' - suffered the stigma and pain of infertility herself before the birth of her sons Joseph and Benjamin. Her tomb is now the focus of a well-established fertility cult. This cult only began to acquire real traction during the nineteenth century at around the time of Judith's visit, and a fertility

33. On this see Green, *Montefiore*, Chapter 8.

amulet written for Judith by the hereditary guardian of Rachel's tomb indicates that she went there in this spirit.[34] Her diary makes no mention of the amulet, nor the women who accompanied her, but the amulet's survival as one of a handful of Hebrew documents among the Montefiore family papers (most of which were burnt), suggests its emotional significance. There is, moreover, a simple intimacy to the way she describes her 'feeling of awe and respect, standing, as I thus did, in the sepulchre of a mother of Israel. The walls of the interior are covered with names and phrases chiefly in Hebrew and other Eastern characters; but some few English are to be found among them, and to these I added the names of Montefiore and myself.'[35] Nor was this engagement with the evolving forms of Jewish religious practice in the East an isolated example.

Returning to Palestine in 1839 with funds for the victims of a recent, devastating earthquake, the Montefiores did so once more in a spirit of pilgrimage: hoping to reach Jerusalem in time for Shavuout, one of the three pilgrim festivals.[36] Travelling through the mountains from Beirut in the company of the rabbinically trained orientalist Dr. Louis Loewe, they repeated prayers and psalms 'rejoicing to make resound, as best we could, the mild and solitary scenes with the praises of our God.'[37]. Stopping on the way at the tomb of Zebulun, they repeated their prayers at the shrine. '[T]he associations connected with

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34. 'To Judith Montefiore. Fertility amulet written by Yehudah, the Honourable and the Oldest Son of Burla, and the Sofer Torah Yossef Nissim Burla', Hebrew document with a a symbolic map of the Old City of Jerusalem, including also an acrostic of Judith's name. (Private Collection of Mr. Robert Sebag-Montefiore [?], 1827). On the fertility cult at Rachel's tomb see Susan Starr Sered, 'Rachel's tomb: the development of a cult', in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995), 104–48, also Margalit Shilo, *Princess or prisoner? Jewish women in Jerusalem, 1840–1914*, trans. David Louvish (Waltham, MA: 2005), 18–33.

35. Oct. 19,1827. Montefiore, *Private Journal*, 206.

36. Friday May 17, JMTD 1839

37. JMTD 1839 15 May

the name and lineage of him whose remains are here deposited, and the lively sense of our own present dependence on the especial mercy of the Almighty filled our hearts with emotion to be likened to no ordinary sentiment, even of religious awe', wrote Judith in her diary that night. A few weeks later, she and Montefiore visited the tomb of Joseph and other Jewish holy sites near Nablus, including the tomb of Eleazar, son of Aaron the high priest, and the tomb of the Seventy Elders where, as Judith noted '[a]n immense number of Hebrew inscriptions and oil lamps, manifested the veneration entertained for the place.' She later described how, as they began to approach Jerusalem the next day, Loewe 'dismounted, and commenced repeating all the Psalms which contain any allusion to Jerusalem or the Holy Land, connecting with them the prayers that are generally offered up at midnight'. '[L]ost in a sense of rapture and indescribable joy' as the Holy City itself rose into view, 'we sat down and poured forth the sentiments which so strongly animated our hearts, in devout praises to him, whose mercy and providence alone had brought us a second time, in health and safety, to the city of our fathers.'[38] Reciting their habitual Sabbath prayers from an encampment on the Mount of Olives, Judith's heart swelled 'with holy emotion', and she recalled the words of the psalm: 'let them bring me unto the holy hill, and to the tabernacles. Then will I go to the altar of God: unto God, my exceeding joy'.[39] Her remembrance of the following Sabbath morning would, she anticipated 'never be effaced'. Such exalted emotions only intensified during the week that followed, which culminated in the Montefiores making a ceremonial entrance to the Old City. 'Oh!' she reflected on her departure, 'Who could dwell upon such scenes, and not glow with devotion and holy love!'

These reactions inevitably had much in common with the sense of spiritual renewal and connection felt by European Christians in the Holy Land, but Judith's pilgrimage reflected a distinctive spiritual geography. Most obviously, she viewed Palestine and its holy places through the prism of Jewish history and religious practice, rather than the gospels. On catching sight of the Sea of Galilee for the first

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38. Thursday June 6 1839. JMTD 1839

39. Saturday June 8 1839, JMTD.

time, her mind turned not to the miracle of Jesus walking upon the water but to the rabbinic graves that cluster about its shores - ‘ the abodes of the learned, the quiet resting places of the righteous of past ages’.[40] In Jerusalem, she accompanied Montefiore to the Tomb of David and made ceremonial visits to various synagogues. Filled as she was with the wonders of her own tradition, the woman who had attended Rome’s Easter ceremonials with such interest only two months earlier did not evince a glimmer of touristic curiousity about the Christian holy places.[41] Yet just as Judith’s Jewishness set her apart from the handful of other wealthy Western European women who visited Palestine in the 1830s, so her wealth and connections exposed her to a realm of religious experience that was usually closed to Jewish women - whether in Europe or in Palestine.

A combination of political unrest and natural disasters had devastated the Jewish communities of the Holy Land during the late 1830s, and the Montefiores’ arrival created an atmosphere of hysterical expectation amongst Jews living in the four Holy Cities of Safed, Tiberias, Jerusalem and Hebron. Their intensely religious worldview and the traditional Jewish association between philanthropy and redemption caused many to see Montefiore himself as God’s instrument on earth, both the author of their immediate salvation and one whose philanthropy would hasten the coming of the Messiah: a miraculous event anticipated by some as early as the following year.[42] As the wife of the ‘*Sar*’ - a prince in Israel - Judith enjoyed a status apart in the communities she visited. She was (if only by association) an *isha hashuva*: a

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40. Thursday May 23 1839, JMTD 1839

41. Sunday March 24 1839. JMTD 1839

42. On the messianic expectations of the Perushim community see Arie Morgenstern, *Messianic concepts and settlement in the Land of Israel*, ed. Richard I. Cohen (Jerusalem and New York, 1985), 141–62 and Arie Morgenstern, *Hastening redemption. Messianism and the resettlement of the Land of Israel*, ed. Joel A. Linsider (Oxford, 2006).

woman of importance deserving of special treatment.[43] In defiance of convention, she was repeatedly led to a place of honour in the synagogue and allowed to participate actively in the Torah service: for instance by lighting the lamps in front of the ark or dressing and undressing the Torah scroll.[44] Her experience in Safed, the town most devastated by the recent upheavals, made a particular impression and, arguably, set the tone for future events. Here, she was given a seat opposite the ark and played an important role in the ceremonial inauguration of a particularly venerated Torah scroll during the festival of Shavuot, which marks God's gift of Torah at Mount Sinai. When the Hasidic leader, Rabbi Abraham Dov, carried the scroll through the streets of the town at the head of a procession of Hasidim singing, dancing and clapping their hands, Judith took her place under the canopy immediately behind him, bearing a lighted taper.

Western European Jews habitually denigrated the charismatic religious style of the Hasidim, which they found alien and not a little embarassing. For a pious Anglo-Jewish woman like Judith, habituated to participating in religious services at a suitably female distance and to practising her faith behind the closed doors of home or synagogue, to find herself at the heart of a religious celebration at once so ecstatic and so public in a half-ruined town charged with spiritual significance must have been overwhelming. It was certainly completely alien to a woman of her class and background. Yet she was not repelled by it. Returning to the synagogue, she was 'struck with the manner of the people, whose joys, as well as anxieties, are all the offspring of devotional associations, and whose songs are addressed to the Deity alone. I felt the honour of being distinguished by them; sitting near the ark and continuing to hold

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43. My thanks to Michael Silber for alerting me to this concept. As a counterpoint to Judith's experience, see Shilo, *Princess or prisoner?* especially Chapter 1.

44. Wednesday June 12th 1839, Jerusalem; Saturday June 15th Hebron, JMTD 1839

the wax taper to the *khakhamim*. The whole might truly be termed the rejoicings of the law. It was the beauty of holiness in the midst of desolation.'[45]

A similar openness to alternative forms of religious experience and Jewish society seems to have characterised the Montefiores' visit to the Lithuania and Poland in 1846. We do not know how Judith responded to the rapturous reception the Montefiores met with in the large and important community of Vilna, where Jews famously unhitched their carriage and dragged it through the streets themselves, nor whether she was as moved by the extraordinary sight of 30,000 Jews preparing to greet the Sabbath as the German reformer Max Lilienthal, who visited a few years earlier as part of his government sponsored attempts to 'modernise' Russian Jewry. But we do know that she and Montefiore 'prayed and wept with much fervour' at the tomb of the great Lithuanian Rabbi, the Gaon of Vilna, and that they repeatedly struggled to contain their emotion throughout the encounter.[46]

Historians have long emphasised the role of Montefiore's first visit to Jerusalem in affirming his commitment to traditional Jewish practice and motivating a lifetime of international philanthropic activity. By contrast, the quality of Judith's spiritual experience and motivation has received relatively little attention. Typically described as the more religious of the two, her piety has been, by and large, taken as read. Indeed, Israel Bartal has down-played the Jewish quality of Judith's religious experiences in Palestine, emphasising instead the extent to which her diaries are 'colored throughout by the culture and world-view of contemporary English society, far indeed from the spirit of Jewish accounts of the time.'[47] Closer analysis suggests a different conclusion, illuminating the ways in which her encounter

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45. Saturday May 18 1839, JMTD 1839

46. 'Posen', *The Jewish Chronicle* II (NS), no. 19 (26 June 1846): 162–63 More generally see Green, *Montefiore*, Chapter 9.

47. Israel Bartal, 'Introduction', in *Private journal of a visit to Egypt and Palestine*, Judith Montefiore (Jerusalem, 1975), II.

with the Jews of the Holy Land, their holy places and religious practices gave her access to the kind of spiritual experience from which, as an Anglo-Jewish woman, she would normally have been excluded.

This spirituality is central to understanding the paradoxes at the heart of Judith Montefiore's status as an icon of Jewish womanhood in the modern era. For, as the early tributes indicate, although Judith was praised in traditional terms as a helpmete and home-maker, a truly pious woman whose feminine identification with Jewish suffering rendered her a mother in Israel, her public impact reflected the ability of an intelligent and cultivated woman to transcend the limits of this role.

On the one hand, Judith's experiences in Palestine cemented her commitment to Jewish life in the Holy Land and provided a concrete focus for her literary and philanthropic energies. Sometimes the connections between the two were palpable, most obviously when she urged her husband to repair and endow the derelict Tomb of Rachel on her second visit in 1839. Sometimes they reflected the personal connections forged during these encounters. Interestingly, the Jews of Palestine treated Judith as an equal partner in her husband's philanthropy, making her director of a *Talmud Torah* school in Hebron and several women's charities, and empowering her to act officially on their behalf in Europe and North America alongside her husband.[48] In this, as in their willingness to accord Judith a place of honour in the synagogue, they demonstrated an acute awareness that the world of Western European Jews was different. 'It is but rarely that ladies trouble themselves with such matters,' wrote the representatives of both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Jerusalem to Judith during the cholera epidemic of 1849, 'but you have on so many occasions joined your noble and august consort in his benevolence to our distressed brethren ... that we are encouraged to appeal to you, as well as to Sir Moses, to make known and publish our distress among your numerous circle of friends, among the women of Judah and Israel in

48. See for instance Kehillat kodesh Ashkenazim, kollel perushim Jerusalem, June 24, 5609 to Lady Judith Montefiore (received, Beyrut), Microfilm 6193/Vol 577, Montefiore M.S.S.. These petitions are currently being catalogued more extensively by the Montefiore Endowment.

Europe, and particularly in England...'[49] This was more than lipservice to the wife of a powerful man. It testified to Judith's on-going financial commitment to the Jews of the Holy Land and to the donations she made to them in her own name. [50] Rigidly traditionalist within their own communities, these rabbis proved surprisingly flexible when it came to dealing with Judith - not because she was an *isha hashuva* in the conventional sense of the word, but because they recognised her as a player in her own right.

On the other hand, Judith's ability to rise to this challenge was rooted not merely in her wealth and social status as an Englishwoman, but in the scope this gave her for public activity. If the encounter with Jews in Palestine added a new and distinctive dimension to her spiritual life, Judith's high-profile literary activities in support of her husband's philanthropic agenda reflected broader patterns within her social circle. As I have argued elsewhere, Montefiore's attempts to promote Jewish agricultural colonisation in Palestine and activities in the cause of international Jewish relief were clearly influenced by his contacts with leading antislavery activists and humanitarians, most notably his business associates Samuel Gurney and his brother-in-law Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton.[51] This contact was not restricted to the men. Wives like Judith played an important role in cementing social connections and we have evidence of her friendly interaction with members of the extended Gurney clan during a trip to Norfolk as early as 1821.[52] It is inconceivable, then, that Judith was not aware of the activities of Gurney's sister-in-law, the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, or of Buxton's daughter Priscilla, who acted as his secretary and was personally deeply invested in her father's political activities.

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49. 'Representatives of the Sephardim and German congregation in Jerusalem, New Moon Tebeth 5609, to Lady Judith Montefiore. Cited in "The state of Jerusalem, Letter III"', *The Jewish Chronicle* V, no. 26 (4 April 1849), 208.

50. See several of the entries in Montefiore letterbook 1844-1851, Mocatta 8, Mocatta Library UCL.

51. Green, *Montefiore,* 12–123 Also Green, 'Rethinking Sir Moses Montefiore'.

52. Sept 18, 1821. JMTD, Arthur-Sebag Montefiore Collection

There are obvious analogies between the role Judith played in Montefiore's life and the extraordinary degree of female participation in the political projects of the Buxton family which, as Kathryn Gleadle has argued, were viewed as a collective enterprise.[53] While Judith could not serve as his secretary (the linguistic variety of his correspondence precluded this), the publication of her travel diaries made a vital contribution to publicising and popularising his ideas about agricultural colonisation in Palestine. More generally, Judith played an active part in what one might term social politics: attending elite social functions alongside her husband in connection with causes like Jewish emancipation, hosting a steady stream of guests at their country house in Ramsgate, and serving alongside leading British society ladies on a variety of charity boards, such as the Executive Committee of the British Syrian Relief Fund, on which she sat with Florence Nightingale, the Countess of Shaftesbury and Lady Stratford de Redcliffe.[54] Judith differed from these ladies not so much in the international scope of her interests, but in the female leadership she offered within the framework of traditional Jewish society in very different parts of the world.

In Palestine in particular, she actively promoted change in ways that reflected the preoccupations of a genteel Englishwoman rather than a devoutly observant Jew. If anything, her agenda was more radical than Montefiore's. His most controversial initiative in Palestine was, in fact, undertaken at her

53. Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline citizens:women, gender and political culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2009), Chapter 7.

54. British Syrian relief fund, Sept? Printed Document. Plastic box: Syrian relief, Montefiore Family Papers. Private Collection of Mr. Robert Sebag-Montefiore. (1860), 2. Now Arthur Sebag-Montefiore Archive, Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

instigation: the establishment of a girls' school teaching Hebrew and sewing in 1855.[55] It was for this - and not his visit to the Temple Mount - that Montefiore was so famously excommunicated by hardline Jerusalem rabbis, for whom formal female education represented the thin end of the reform wedge.[56] Like most of Montefiore's initiatives it proved shortlived, but perhaps its brief success served to challenge the conventions surrounding female education. Writing in 1857, Flora Randegger, a Jewish teacher from Trieste reported in the *Educatore Israelita* that attitudes were changing in the Holy City, and there was now 'a strong wish among many families to have their daughters taught some European languages'.[57]

In Eastern Europe, the implications of Judith's activities were equally startling. When the Montefiores visited Warsaw in 1846, a group of women led by the widows of four leading community rabbis or *dayanim*, addressed her as follows 'In a gathering we all agreed today to declare the pious lady Baroness Yehudit Montefiore the head of our association. May she serve as the leading example of our association, in it and among us, and in all the good deeds for our poor sisters in Israel here [in our community]. May her mercifulness be an example before our eyes which teaches us to do like her, and may from today all our actions take place in her name.'[58]

There are obvious parallels between this document and the letters empowering Judith to act as *Gabbait* (treasurer) for various Jewish institutions in Palestine. While there is evidence of female

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55. 'Tuesday, 31st July, 5615: 1855. Travel diary from Montefiore's third trip to Palestine in 1855', transcript, Call no. Ms. Var. 21:, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem (1855) On Jewish female education in Palestine see Shilo, *Princess or prisoner?* Chapter 5.

56. A. Schischa, 'The saga of 1855: a study in depth', in *The century of Moses Montefiore*, ed. Sonia L. Lipman and Vivian D. Lipman (Oxford, 1985), 269–348.

57. 'Jerusalem', *Jewish chronicle* XIV, no. 152 (13 November 1857): 1211.

58. Montefiore Testimonial 79, Warsaw 1846. Collection of the Montefiore Endowment held at UCL. My thanks to Francois Guesnet for drawing my attention to this document.

involvement in some of those charities on an everyday level, the letters of authorisation sent to Judith were invariably signed by men. What is striking about the Warsaw document, is that the signatories are all women. They write on behalf of an explicitly female charitable association, and they declare a desire to emulate Judith's example. We cannot know for certain, but it is possible – even likely – that the association itself was a new foundation, established at a gathering held during Judith's visit to Warsaw with a view to following her lead by nurturing a distinctively female tradition of philanthropic activism in their own community. At the very least, it testifies to the leadership Judith offered to Jewish women living in societies very different to her own. And in reality, she set an example that went far beyond charity.

Take for instance the impact of her account of the Montefiores' trip to Palestine in 1839. Published in 1844 together with some translated letters to Montefiore from local Jewish leaders apparently sympathetic to his proposals for agricultural colonisation, the book was excerpted in French in the *Univers Israélite* shortly afterwards. It attracted the attention of no less a figure than the future founder of religious Zionism, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, who wrote to Montefiore requesting a copy.[59] Reprinted in Hebrew translation after Judith's death under the auspices of Louis Loewe, it served as a major reference point in the debates of the 1870s.[60] Interestingly, while the translator took pains to disguise the Montefiores' less than perfect adherence to the religious observances of Eastern European Jewish society, the unprecedented impact of a female writer in the entirely male world of Jewish letters, Hebrew literature and international Jewish politics was deemed unremarkable. Clearly, the explanation

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59. Kalischer to Montefiore, Heshvan 16, 1844, and Shebat 29, 1845, Montefiore letterbook 1844-1851, Mocatta 8, Mocatta Library UCL. On Kalischer see Jody Myers, *Seeking Zion. Modernity and messianic activism in the writings of Tsevi Hirsch Kalischer* (Oxford, 2003).

60. See the discussion in Israel Bartal, 'Settlement proposals during Montefiore's second visit to Eretz Israel, 1839 (Hebrew)', *Shalem* 2 (1976), 231–96.

for this lies in Judith's unique status as Montefiore's wife and, perhaps, as a woman whose childless status enabled her to be appreciated as the mother of a nation rather than the maker of a home.

Both contemporaries and historians have tended to treat Judith and Montefiore's achievement as a common project, and up to a point this was true. Brought together by shared interests, values and social networks, they grew together through their childlessness and through the rich and varied experiences they shared as they travelled throughout Europe and the Middle East, experiences which reinforced the spiritual commitment to their common Jewishness in a variety of ways. But this joint endeavour should not disguise the very different quality of leadership they provided in the Jewish world. As Israel Bartal has argued, Montefiore captured the Jewish imagination in part because of his ability to be all things to all men.[61] To modernizers, Montefiore represented the achievements of emancipated Western Jewry through his wealth, his social status and Western dress, and the endorsement of education in the vernacular. To traditionalists, he represented the triumph of religious values, since he was famous for his religious observance. Judith was likewise famed for her piety, and the writers of her obituaries chose to see her as a 'perfect daughter of Israel'. While this may reflect her sense of self and the quality of her spiritual experiences, it should not disguise the radical nature of her impact or the sheer gulf that separated her from the Jewish women she encountered in other parts of the world.

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61. Israel Bartal, 'Nationalist before his time or a belated shtadlan? - Guidelines for the Activities of Moses Montefiore', in *The age of Moses Montefiore*, ed. Israel Bartal (Jerusalem, 1987), 5–24; Israel Bartal, 'Between two worlds: reconsidering Sir Moses Montefiore' (University College London, Institute of Jewish Studies, Conference held on Britain and the Holy Land 1800–1914., 1989).