

Benjamin Disraeli

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We may think that current political discourse is crude and vicious. But believe me, beneath a veneer of gentility, politics in the British Empire was worse. As Hobbes put "nasty and brutish." If he were alive today Benjamin Disraeli would agree with me!

Benjamin Disraeli, 1804 –1881 was born in London. His family came to England from an Italy. Although his father held membership in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, he never attended. He was expected, as a member to join the board which he did for a time. But he officially resigned over whether he could be compelled to continue and left the community altogether. Benjamin and his sister were converted to Anglicanism as children, and brought up in the Church of England. He had hardly any knowledge of Judaism and its practices and came to believe that Judaism was a purely racial phenomenon. He even saw it as a barbaric faith that had been superseded by Christianity, and he believed that all Jews should abandon the Old Testament for the New. He rebuked his friends the Rothschilds for hanging onto their Jewish identities. But when it suited him, he played up his supposed Jewish aristocratic lineage.

He was attracted to journalism, and throughout his life he wrote popular novels. He entered politics on the side of Reform but switched to the party of the Aristocratic landowners, the conservatives, supporting the monarchy, the Church of England, and the protectionism of the landed aristocracy. In 1868 he became Prime Minister for the first time, briefly, before leading the party to a majority in the 1874 election. He developed a very close friendship with Queen Victoria. He was quite a ladies man and accused of using his wiles to win her over. He was proudly British and he fought for its imperial interests, supporting the declining Ottoman Empire to thwart Russian expansion and buying the Suez Canal (with the help of the Rothschilds) to facilitate British access to its Eastern colonies.

He tried to distance himself from Judaism. Rather like Henry Kissinger in his prime. He avoided getting involved in the long struggle to allow a Jew to become a member of parliament if he would not swear by the Christian faith. When he visited the Middle East and Jerusalem, he spoke to no Jews and visited no synagogues. He refused to support Sir Moses Montefiore and Albert Cremieux in coming to the aid of the Syrian Jews imprisoned and tortured over the Damascus Blood Libel in 1840 or the kidnapping by the Catholic Church of the Jewish child Edgardo Mortara in 1858. Neither did he support Laurence Oliphant, the Christian Zionist who came to him asking for support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine in 1879.

Yet for all that Disraeli tried to escape his Jewish identity, he was hounded and reviled throughout his life and beyond as an oily, devious, dishonest Jew, typical of all those who shared his history.

The late lamented and talented David Cesarani who passed away too soon, was commissioned to write a short life of Disraeli for the Yale University series called "Jewish Lives." As paradoxical and inconsistent a selection of subjects as one could dream up if one tried. The mere fact of including Disraeli as one shows how loosely the net has been drawn. The book is not an easy read, but very worthwhile. It only reminds us how deeply the virus of anti-Semitism was embedded in British society from the eighteenth century onwards, even exceeding in its virulence that of France and Germany (which is saying something).

Such was the hatred that the Jew Bill of 1753, granting Jews civil rights, had been passed by Parliament, signed by King George, but then revoked because of the outcry from the church, commerce, aristocracy, and the middle classes. It would take another hundred years until Lionel de Rothschild was finally allowed to take his seat in Parliament, because he was finally allowed to take an oath on the Old Testament only. There were philo-Semites too, of course, like George Eliot and indeed Laurence Oliphant. But they were few and far between and overwhelmed by the primitive hatred of the English upper and middle classes in general (educated and ignorant alike).

Cesarani's thesis is that Disraeli was excoriated and despised and mistrusted so much precisely because of his Jewish birth. Yet he came to acknowledge his Jewish birth with pride. Why? The source of his pride was his belief that the Jewish race has bequeathed nobility and talent to humanity through its inspiration of Christianity and Islam. His novels were sprinkled with Jewish heroes and noble examples of Jewish wisdom and generosity. But they were all without an iota of Jewish religious commitment or identity, and on the few occasions he tried to insert something of the Jewish religion, he got it completely wrong. Yet his famous reply to an anti-Semitic attack was "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the right honorable gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the temple of Solomon." To him, the fact that he had Jewish blood defined him racially, if not religiously. Such views were eagerly adopted by the evil pantheon of European Jew-haters. As Cesarani says:

"Ultimately he fits squarely into modern Jewish history for the worst reasons: he played a formative part in the construction of anti-Semitic discourse. Within a few years of his demise his words were being cited by Baurer, Marr, Drumont, Chamberlain, Hillaire Belloc, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, even Hitler, to justify their insane and pathological hatred of Jews."

All his early biographies were written by anti-Semites like Edward Freeman, Goldwin Smith, and Thomas O'Connor, who all demeaned him and betrayed their own crude anti-Semitism.

In 1877 the Turks had reacted to a Christian rebellion in Serbia and Bulgaria with barbaric force and cruelty. Disraeli took steps to block the Russian military assault on the Ottomans. The lords of his Conservative Party and public opinion insisted that Disraeli punish the Turks. But, he refused to.

Together with Germany and France, he blocked Russian advance in the Middle East and at the Treaty of Berlin was rewarded with the island of Cyprus. For his pains, he was scurrilously attacked as a Jew who undermined Christianity in favor of the Turks because they were more sympathetic to the Jews than the Christians.

Disraeli desperately wanted to escape Judaism and be accepted by the British aristocracy. But in the end he was, in Bismarck's words, just considered "the Old Jew." His success in the end was ability to use the system to his advantage. If anything he proved that you don't have to be loved to be successful. Some of the most effective politicians have been the least likable. Times have not changed as much as we like to think they have.