

# Oliver Cromwell and the readmission of the Jews to England

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*In 1290 the Jews were expelled from England, and it was not until 1656 that they were readmitted. Religious trends in England at this time made people more favourable to the Jews. The petitions which the Jew, Menasseh ben Israel, made to the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, were the main factors which led to the readmission. Reflections by a Chief Rabbi on the 350th anniversary of the readmission show a fear of rising anti-Semitism and provide an ironic contrast to the religious beliefs of Jews and Gentiles in the seventeenth century.*

**I**N DEUTERONOMY 28 God said, "And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the LORD [Yahweh] shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: and thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life: in the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see" (vv. 65-67).

These words have come to pass during the past 2,000 years, and they are still true today. Anti-Semitism is on the rise, and Jews are fearful and scared for what is happening. Actually, they are not just scared, they are very scared. This is shown by the recent comments of the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Sir Jonathan Sacks. In an interview with the BBC he spoke of a "tsunami of anti-Semitism" in the world. He said, "I am very scared by [it] and I'm very scared that more protests have not been delivered against it, but this [anti-Semitism] is part of the vocabulary of politics in certain parts of the world".<sup>1</sup> This "tsunami of anti-Semitism" and the fear it engenders are a sign that the words of Christ are being fulfilled: "... the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken" (Lk. 21:25,26).

**Sir Jonathan Sacks. Full title, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, in office since September 1991.**



PICTURE: grawemeyer.org

Sir Jonathan Sacks was being interviewed to mark the 350th anniversary of the readmission of Jews into England. The Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 by Edward I. They were readmitted in 1656 under Oliver Cromwell, although there were some Jews in England before this time who kept their Jewish identity secret; they were known as *conversos*. In this article we will consider the events which led up to the readmission of the Jews into England. As will be seen, the religious beliefs of both Jews and Gentiles played an important part in these events, and these beliefs provide a contrast to the beliefs and attitudes of many Jews and Gentiles today.

## Background

Following the English Civil War (which was actually three separate wars) Cromwell became Lord Protector in 1653. He had a Council of State and a single-chamber parliament to assist him. The kingdom had become a Commonwealth. The king, Charles 1, had been beheaded during the war in 1649.

On the Continent, the Portuguese Inquisition and the Thirty Years' War had caused a build-up

1. Hastings, C. (2006), "Chief Rabbi warns of anti-Semitic 'tsunami'", *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 Jan., pp. 1-2.

PICTURE: © iStockphoto.com/GUY ERWOOD



**Statue of Oliver Cromwell in St Ives, Cambridgeshire, erected by public subscription in 1900. Cromwell was born in nearby Huntingdon, but lived in St Ives for six years from 1631 to 1636.**

of pressure of Jews wishing to escape to Britain. At the same time within England there were several factors at work that were fostering a more sympathetic outlook towards the Jews.

After the Reformation, religious opposition tended to be directed more towards the Catholics; thus attention was diverted somewhat from the Jews. The Bible, including the Old Testament, was now becoming much more available to the ordinary person. Teachings associated with Judaism were thus becoming better understood and accepted. Puritan sects in England (Cromwell was a Puritan) adopted certain Jewish ways, such as keeping the Sabbath on Saturday. Hebrew studies developed in universities, and there was a degree of religious pluralism.

However, in addition to the above, there was one religious belief in particular that had a profound effect on attitudes towards the Jew. This was the belief in the coming millennial reign of Christ. As one historian has written:

“There was much talk of the ‘restoration’ of the Jews; their conversion to Christianity was

expected as an essential preliminary to the millennium; some argued for their return to the Holy Land then under Turkish rule; others advocated their readmission to England”.<sup>2</sup>

This belief was significant, not because Jews believed it, but because it was believed that Jews would need to be converted for the millennial reign to begin. Whilst Cromwell was motivated partly by religious considerations, economic and political factors were also important, and his attitude to the Jews should be seen in this light. However, there is no doubt that the religious environment of the time was a key factor in what was to transpire in relation to the Jews.

In 1654 there had been contact between a Jew and Cromwell, the outcome of which showed that Cromwell had some sympathy towards the Jews. David Abrabanel, a Jew, had fled from Brazil following the Portuguese conquest of that country (his original name was Manuel Martinez Dormido). He made two petitions to Cromwell. He asked him to appeal to Portugal to restore his property and he also asked for the readmission of Jews to England. His petitions were referred to the Council of State. The Council took no action on either request, but Cromwell did personally write to the king of Portugal with regard to the property issue. The case of Abrabanel is significant because it shows that, even before 1656, a Jew could openly admit to being Jewish in England apparently with impunity.

### **Jew with a key role**

The Jew who played a key role in securing the readmission of Jews to England was Menasseh ben Israel. He was a Sephardi rabbi from Amsterdam. In 1650 a pamphlet he had written entitled *Spes Israel* (the *Hope of Israel*) was translated into English and brought to the attention of the English Parliament. A Member of Parliament, Sir Edward Spenser, replied to the document, in which he said that if Jews were to be readmitted it would be under conditions severe enough to ensure they repented and converted to Christianity. In fact the document made no mention of readmission. Nor, incidentally, was it similar to the book we know as *Elpis Israel*. Its main purpose was to console Jews with the prospect of the near coming of the

2. Pollins, H. (1982), *Economic History of the Jews in England*. Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, p. 30. This book provides a useful chapter on the events surrounding the readmission in 1656, and is the main source for this article.

Messiah, based on the premise that by then the Jews had been completely dispersed around the world. Although it did not lead directly to any great change, the document and its reception are significant because they are an indicator of the connections which Menasseh ben Israel had with politicians in England.

In 1655 Menasseh ben Israel came to England and produced a pamphlet entitled *The Humble Addresses*, in which he argued for the readmission of Jews to England. One of his main arguments was his claim that Jews brought wealth to the countries in which they lived:

“... they do abundantly enrich the Lands and Countrys of Strangers, where they live, not onely with what is requisite and necessary for the life of man; but also what may serve for ornament to his civill condition”.<sup>3</sup>

Specific benefits for host nations included, amongst other things, “the augmentation of the Publiq Tolls and Customes, at their coming and going out of the place”, “the transporting and bringing in of merchandises from remote Countries” and “the affording of Materials in great plenty for all Mechaniqs; as Wooll, Leather, Wines, Jewels, as Diamants, Pearles, and such like Merchandize”.

Interestingly, he also plainly acknowledged that the reason for the dispersion of the Jews was their wickedness in the sight of God. Moreover, he used scripture references to support this claim:

“The Nation of the Jews is dispersed throughout the whole World, it being a chastisement that God hath layd upon them for their Idolatries, Deut, 28:69 [sic], Ezech. 20:23, Nehem. 1:8, Ps. 107:27, and by their other sinnes their familes suffer the same shipwrack”.

### Readmission

With this document as background material, in the autumn of 1655 he submitted a petition to Cromwell concerning the readmission of Jews to England. He asked that they might have equality with other citizens, and that they be allowed public synagogues, freedom of religious observance, and to have their own burial grounds. He also asked for their own tribunals to try cases according to Mosaic Law. The petition was considered by a conference of prelates, lawyers and merchants held in Whitehall, London, in December 1655. The main outcome of this conference was that it was agreed there was no legal objection to Jews in England. However, there was no decision made on the petition itself. There was substantial

opposition within the conference. For example, theologians argued that Jews would not convert to Christianity, and the merchants were afraid of competition. Cromwell argued for the petition to be approved, although he was by no means uncritical of the Jews. In the end, no decision was made by the conference.

During 1655 war had broken out between England and Spain. As a consequence, in March 1656 the Council of States ordered the seizure of property belonging to the Spanish Crown. In response to this a man called Antonio Robles, a *converso*, had two ships impounded. He appealed against this on the grounds that he was a Portuguese Jew and not a Spanish Catholic. In May his appeal was accepted and his goods returned. This provided a precedent for the notion that Jews could dwell in Britain and own property.

Also in March 1656, Menasseh ben Israel and six *conversos* submitted a petition requesting written assurance that Jews might be allowed to continue to live their lives in the same way, including private religious meetings, and that they might have a licence to enable them to bury their dead. There is no documentary evidence that a formal approval of this petition was made. However, in late 1656 a lease for a house in Cree Church Lane, London, to be used as a synagogue, was obtained. And in 1657 a plot of land in Mile End, London, was obtained for Jewish burial. Despite the absence of formal documentation relating to the readmission of Jews in 1656, this year undoubtedly marked a key turning point for Jews in Britain.

Cromwell died in 1658 and was succeeded by his son. But in 1660 the crown was restored when Charles II became king. A year later, the body of Oliver Cromwell, which had been buried in Westminster Abbey, was ignominiously disinterred and then hanged and beheaded at the instigation of the king. The Jews found favour under Charles II and succeeding kings. Indeed, the progress made under Cromwell was played down, and perhaps even suppressed, by Jews in the following years who did not wish to antagonise royalty by praising the Lord Protectorate. It was only in the nineteenth century that historians came to recognise the importance of Cromwell in

3. Extract from *The Humble Addresses of Menasseh ben Israel* (1655) in Mendes-Flohr, P. and Reinharz, J. (ed.) (1995), *The Jew in the Modern World—A Documentary History*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 10-13.

relation to the Jews. 1656 is generally recognised now as the year in which the period of expulsion, which began in 1290, came to an end.

### Conclusion

We know from prophecy that Jerusalem is to be "a burdensome stone for all people" (Zech. 12:3). Jerusalem and the Jews are at the centre of God's purpose with the earth. As we have seen, it was this belief that encouraged a more favourable attitude towards the Jews in seventeenth-century England. However, it is ironic that in his interview the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, attempts to play down the role of the Jews in the world. In speaking of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he argues: "to make this [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict—where the two sides have worked now for 12 years in a process of peace—the epicentre of

global politics is not merely wrong . . . but it is also quite troubling".<sup>4</sup> Yet Israel is to become the epicentre, for God will "gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle" (14:2).

Menasseh ben Israel acknowledged that the Jews were being punished for wickedness, something which Sacks does not appear to do. However, Menasseh ben Israel did not go as far as to say that Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified was the Messiah, the Son of God. Yet there will come a time when "they shall look upon Me Whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn" (12:10). When this occurs then the Millennium will truly be able to begin.

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4. *Op cit.*

## God our strength

Charles Morgan

*This article, first published in July 1947, considers how God provides help and strength to believers in their walk to the Kingdom.*

**G**OD WAS THE strength of His people Israel. In the beginning of their history He brought them out of a hopeless bondage to be a people for Himself, and He delivered them as a nation, time after time, when they appeared to be at the mercy of their enemies. There are sure grounds for confidence in the strength that God has made available for His people in all ages and in every race, and reflection upon its individual aspect is necessary and inspiring.

From a physical point of view, strength of body and strength of mind are priceless possessions for which, with all good gifts, we are dependent upon God. Strength as a term expressive of our natural powers is relative. Men are apt to pride themselves upon their fitness and strength; but they are so unreliable, and they so soon fade away entirely, that we know it to be true that "every man at his best state is altogether vanity" (Ps. 39:5).

"Power [mg. strength] belongeth unto God" (62:11). This statement by the psalmist needs no reservation. God is omnipotent, and, as His creatures, we are dependent upon Him. From Him we receive the strength that is necessary to meet the ordinary needs of natural life. In days gone

by, God gave men strength to meet extraordinary demands upon their physical powers. We are able to read of occasions, such as the experience of the friends of Daniel, when more than human strength and endurance were necessary if deliverance was to be effected.

There are other ways, apart from miraculous deliverance and apart from deeds of physical prowess, in which God has been, is, and will be the strength of His people. We refer to a strength of spirit, sustained and fortified by faith in God, which in times of trouble and adversity has enabled men to be loyal to their God and their faith, even unto death itself. Men and women shine forth from the living page of history, who, though frail in body, have endured persecution, torture and the fires of the stake, steadfast in purpose to the end. To such noble characters the words of the inspired writer apply: "out of weakness were made strong" (Heb. 11:34). The secret of their strength lay in their ability to draw upon the source of all strength.

In so far as we receive the strength that is available from God, thus far shall we be successful in the things of the Spirit. We are conscious that our life is beset with difficulty and that we are subject to all kinds of limitations. Wherever there is human nature, there is weakness and the knowledge of sin. It follows that, since strength belongs to God, the strength which He gives to