

Colonel Charles Henry Churchill's letter to Sir Moses Montefiore, a first in supporting a Jewish state in Palestine

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On this day in Jewish history, June 14, 1841, British Colonel [Charles Henry Churchill](#) wrote a letter to [Sir Moses Montefiore](#) supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Montefiore, was a British banker, President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and philanthropist, who founded the first New Yishuv, [Mishkenot Sha'ananim](#) in 1860, the first Jewish settlement outside the walls of the old City of Jerusalem. Churchill served as the British consul to Ottoman Syria, which included Palestine, today's Israel. Churchill, an evangelical Protestant, and ancestor of the future Prime Minister Winston Churchill, was one of the first to suggest the political establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Montefiore spent his whole life living as part of the [Western Europe's Jewish elite](#) and his adult life as the "the preeminent Jewish figure of the nineteenth century" as Abigail Green recounts in her biography "Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero," the most complete biography of his life. Montefiore was one of the 12 Jewish financial brokers in London in the early 19th century. Born in Italy to a Sephardic Jewish family, his family moved back to England, where Montefiore was educated.

Afterward, Montefiore entered the grocers and tea merchants' trade, before going into the finance business and stockbroking with his brother Abraham. Montefiore's profile and success in the business grew when he married into Nathan Mayer Rothschild's family. Among the Jewish world, Montefiore's business is not what made him well known and remembered, but his philanthropy and proto-Zionism in pre-state Israel. Montefiore retired young

from the business world in 1824 at the age of 40 to concentrate the rest of his long life on his philanthropic efforts.

Montefiore's first visit to Israel was in 1827 and it changed his life, specifically when he and his wife Judith Barent-Cohen prayed at Rachel Tomb for children; although the Montefiore never had any children. He subsequently visited Israel six other times, the last time in 1875 when he was 91 years-old. The moment led him to become religiously observant, he served as the president of the Beavis Marks Synagogue for 39 years and traveled with a "shohet" to ensure all the meat he ate was kosher as he extensively traveled.

Montefiore met Churchill in Malta in November 1840, when Churchill asked if he could serve as a courier to Damascus. Churchill arrived in February 1841 and the head of the Jewish community Raphael Farhi held a reception in his honor on March 1.

Churchill gave his first speech supporting Jewry to rousing applause:

"May this happy meeting be looked upon as ... a forecast of such a connection and alliance between the English and the Jewish nation as shall be honourable and advantageous to both. May the hour of Israel's deliverance be at hand. May the approximation of Western civilization to the interesting land be the dawn of her regeneration, and of her political existence; may the Jewish nation once more claim her rank among the powers of the world!" (Green, 206)

Churchill would author two letters to Montefiore advocating "Jewish national regeneration in Palestine." (Grief, 535) In the first letter dated, June 14, 1841, Churchill advised that the Jews should commence "agitation... to resume their [political] existence as a people." Churchill believed with the "aid" of the "European Powers," Jews would attain in the end 'the sovereignty of at least Palestine."



In his second letter, dated over a year later on August 15, 1842, Churchill

seemed to backtrack stating that only as subjects of the sublime Porte could Jews "recover their ancient country or regain a footing in Palestine." They would need the Five Great Powers (Britain, France, Russia, Austria, and Prussia) to advocate that the Sultan allow them to settle and "colonize" in Palestine, "under the protection of the Great Powers." Under Churchill's proposal, Jewish colonies would be autonomous but would be required to pay a tax to the Sultan. Churchill concluded that "Judea" would be "once more a refuge and resting place" for world Jewry. (Grief, 535)

In addition to the letter, Churchill included a detailed proposal about how this colonization would be established. The first step was an application to

the British Government to the attention of Foreign Secretary Lord Aberdeen. Aberdeen would send a person to Syria "a fit and proper person to watch over the interests of the Jews." Churchill finished his letter writing "God has put in my heart the desire to serve His ancient people... I have discharged a duty imposed on me by my conscience." (Grief, 535)

Montefiore took Churchill's two letters to the Board of Deputies of British Jews where he served as president. On November 8, 1942, they responded to Montefiore, that they would not be initiating Churchill's proposal or any other for settlement in Palestine, but would participate if a Jewish community in another country would. In less than a decade, Montefiore would begin settling Jews in settlements in Palestine on his initiative and working with Churchill.

Montefiore's most extensive philanthropy was towards the small Jewish community in Israel, hoping to entice more Jews to live there. He turned towards settling Israel in 1854 when he became the executor of American Judah Touro's will; Touro wanted a settlement created with his money. Montefiore used his money and that of Touro's estate to establish agricultural communities outside of Jerusalem's Old City beginning the New Yishuv. Montefiore purchased an orchard outside Jerusalem to provide agricultural training to Jews in 1855 and in 1860 created the first settlement, Mishkenot Sha'ananim or the Inhabitations of Delight. Montefiore added incentives to encourage poorer Jews to settle despite the dangers. The first settlement consisted of "twenty-four apartments on the slopes of Talibiyeh facing Mount Zion." (Blumberg, 60)

Afterward, he created additional neighborhoods, "the Ohel Moshe neighborhood for Sephardic Jews and the Mazkeret Moshe neighborhood for Ashkenazi Jews." Montefiore also set-up the essentials for a growing community in Jerusalem, including health care, education and charity, some industries and essential factories, and the Montefiore Windmill to mill flour in Yemin Moshe, which still stands today. Montefiore hired Churchill to train the Jews in agriculture. According to Arnold Blumberg in "Eretz Israel, Israel, and the Jewish Diaspora: Mutual Relations," Montefiore, however, was "not interested in creating a Jewish state, he did regard the normalization of Jewish life through self-supporting labor, as essential." (Blumberg, 60) While, Derek Penslar called Montefiore's settlements "Palestinophilia," the "establishment of philanthropic enterprises devoted to the social and economic transformation of Palestinian Jewry." (Penslar, 63)

The exchanges between Churchill and Montefiore and Churchill's proposal helped develop proto-Zionism, the forerunners of Zionism. As Blumberg noted, "In Palestine itself, the old Yishuv seemed untouched by the currents of nineteenth-century thought. Nevertheless... the entry of western Jews upon the scene had laid the foundation for the new Yishuv. Long before the advent of political Zionism, a new spirit was alive in Palestinian Jewry."

(Blumberg, 61) Churchill's proposal led to Montefiore taking charge and funding settlement beyond the Old Yishuv in Jerusalem's old city, setting the stage for the new settlements and the aliyahs to Palestine that commenced in 1882.

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