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GREAT BRITAIN AND THE JEWS

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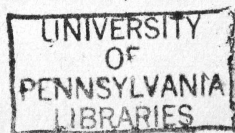
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GREAT BRITAIN AND THE JEWS

TO those to whom the History of the Jews in England is familiar the adoption by the British Government of the Zionist cause and its promise to use its best endeavours to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people will not have come altogether as a surprise, for both as regards the restoration of the Jews to Palestine and the position of the Jews in the Diaspora, without as well as within the British Empire, successive governments ever since the time of Oliver Cromwell have been consistently sympathetic and have at times even strained the letter of the law in order to forward the welfare of the Jews.

In the time of the Commonwealth, Cromwell and his government went out of their way to facilitate the re-settlement of the Jews in England; although, as shown by the proceedings at the Whitehall Conference, the English people was hardly yet ripe for the admission of Jews in any number into their midst, and the Lord Protector, in pursuance of his policy of toleration and sympathy with the Jews, went further than, to the superficial observer, the

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people was willing to follow him. But Cromwell understood the English people better than did their own representatives, and the readmission of the Jews to England in the last years of the Commonwealth led to no untoward incidents.

The Stuarts on their restoration continued Cromwell's policy of protecting the Jews—at that time they had little other protection in England than that of the favour of the ruler or government. In the first years after the Restoration several attempts were made by noblemen and other highly placed disturbers of the peace to blackmail or secure the expulsion of the small Jewish colony that had settled in London, but in every instance the King of his own motion, without any legislative sanction on which to rely, suppressed the intrigue and protected the Jews from those who had evil designs on them. At the same time, although their legal position was somewhat ambiguous, there was much doubt whether Jewish merchants trading in England were liable for alien duties or not. Throughout the reigns of Charles II and James II they were allowed the benefit of the doubt, and it was only after the Revolution, when a generation of English-born Jews had arisen and the question had lost the greater part of its insistence, that the letter of the law in its bearing on Jews was strictly applied.

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The Jews were also allowed every facility for the practice of religion. The Uniformity legislation, directed against Nonconformists, passed over their heads without touching them, although legally they were equally liable with other Nonconformists for breaches of the Conventicle and other Acts. Once, in 1673, proceedings were taken under the Conventicle Act against a number of prominent Jews, but on appeal to the King in Council the proceedings were stayed and measures taken to prevent a repetition of them.

Coming to more recent times when a Jew of Gibraltar suffered at the hands of the Greek Government, the British Government under Palmerston took instant steps to obtain redress and prepared to mobilize the whole of Britain's might so that this insignificant Jew of Gibraltar might be assured of justice. It was Palmerston who energetically defended Jewish interests at the time of the Damascus Affair when, as a consequence of a false charge of ritual murder brought against the Jews of Damascus, the position of the Jews throughout the Near East was gravely imperilled. The British Foreign Minister, with the full support of parliament and people, gave explicit instructions to the British representatives at Constantinople and Alexandria to take immediate steps so that the cruelties from

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which certain representative Jews and Jewish communities were suffering should cease. In the House of Commons the leader of the opposition, Sir Robert Peel, was no less zealous than Palmerston in pleading the cause of the persecuted Jews, and their policy was approved both in parliament, in the press and at a largely attended and representative meeting held in the City of London.

One of the immediate consequences of the Damascus affair was the issue of instructions to all British representatives in the Levant and Syria, placing the Jews of all nationalities under their special protection. These instructions were acted on on several occasions and the Jews were in consequence spared much suffering. The instructions given by Lord Palmerston were confirmed later by Lord Aberdeen, also in the name of the British Government. A generation later at the Berlin Congress the cause of the Jews in the Balkan States was championed by Lord Beaconsfield and Lord Salisbury, acting on behalf of the British Government.

The grant of full civil and political rights to the Jews was made a condition of the independence of all of the Balkan States—Roumania, Servia, Bulgaria and Montenegro. The last three loyally carried out their undertaking. Roumania's failure to do so cannot in any manner be laid at the door of Britain.

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Successive British Governments also used every influence within their power on the Tzars to ameliorate the situation of their Jewish subjects. Here also the will was very evident, even though the power was lacking.

In an entirely different sphere also Great Britain has always shown the utmost consideration for Jewish susceptibilities. Under the different Factory Acts the hours and days of labour have been carefully limited. In the absence of forethought observant Jews would have suffered considerable hardship inasmuch as, religiously bound to abstain from labour on their Sabbath and legally compelled to rest on Sunday, the working week of the Jew would have been reduced to five days. But Parliament took cognizance of this difficulty and legislated specially to meet it. A special provision was also incorporated in the Ballot Act so as to prevent the disfranchisement of observant Jews when an election falls on a Saturday or Jewish festival. For the past century Parliament has always been scrupulously careful of Jewish customs and ordinances whenever it has had legislation that might affect them under consideration and has always been anxious to meet the wishes of the Jewish community whenever they have been expressed.

So far as Zionism is concerned, Great Britain is

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by no means a recent convert. The British Government's declaration of policy of November 1917 is in fact the coping-stone of an edifice which has been in process of construction for the past seventy years. Palmerston, Shaftesbury (the good Earl), Clarendon—also Foreign Secretary—Lord Beaconsfield, Lord Salisbury, Lord Rosebery, Viscount Grey and the late King Edward all showed, whenever the opportunity offered, their strong sympathy with the Zionist ideal. Lord Shaftesbury's schemes for the re-settlement of the Jews in Palestine were favourably regarded by Lord Palmerston and his successor, Lord Clarendon, and they were wholeheartedly supported by other public men of less eminence. Sir Moses Montefiore, in his efforts in the same direction, also always enjoyed the support of the British Foreign Office.

A generation later, when Laurence Oliphant applied the whole of his energies to the elaboration and furtherance of a scheme for the re-settlement of the Jews in Palestine, he was ably seconded in his negotiations at the Porte by the British Ambassador acting on instructions received from London. The *Chovevé Zion* movement, one for the colonization of Palestine by Jews, always obtained ready support from the British Foreign Office whenever it needed it. Whenever difficulties were placed by the Turkish

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Government in the way of Jewish immigration into or settlement in Palestine, the British Government needed little urging to make representations on behalf of the Jews. When in 1887 Turkey introduced new regulations limiting to one month the stay of foreign Jews in Palestine, the British Government protested against the regulations and succeeded in getting them abrogated.

Four years later, when the *Chovevé Zion* petitioned the Porte not to hinder the settlement of foreign Jews in Palestine, the petition was strongly supported by the British Foreign Minister, Lord Salisbury, and by the British Ambassador through whom it was forwarded. The next Foreign Secretary, Lord Rosebery, supported it as earnestly as his predecessor had done. And when the *Chovevé Zion* movement was merged in the greater Zionist movement, founded by Theodor Herzl, the sympathy and support of the British Government became even more pronounced.

On three historic occasions Great Britain through its responsible Government has formally and publicly stepped forth as the well-wisher and friend of Zionism. The first was on the occasion of the El Arish project; the second took the form of an offer of territory in British East Africa for an autonomous Jewish settlement; the third is the pronouncement in favour of the re-establishment in Palestine of a

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national home for the Jewish people, with which the world is still ringing.

The suggestion for a Jewish autonomous settlement in the El Arish Peninsula—one of the borderlands of Palestine—came from the Zionist leaders, but was immediately received with sympathy by the British and Anglo-Egyptian Governments. The Zionist commission that was sent out to investigate the possibilities of the region was assisted in every way by these two Governments, and if only El Arish had been found suitable for settlement on any large scale there can be no doubt that, with the willing co-operation of the British and Egyptian Governments, it would to-day be the scene of a Jewish autonomous colony.

The El Arish project led directly to that of a Jewish East Africa. But in this case the suggestion came from Britain and not from the Zionists. The idea of a Jewish settlement in East Africa first occurred to Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, and, after the Prime Minister, the most influential member of the Cabinet. British East Africa was not within his sphere but in that of the Foreign Office, to which the consideration of the suggestion was therefore referred. There it was taken up eagerly by the Foreign Minister, Lord Lansdowne, the Under-Secretary, Earl Percy, and

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the officials of the department immediately concerned. If the decision had rested with them, British East Africa to-day would also have been the scene of a self-governing Jewish settlement. In the letter of the Foreign Office to the Zionist Organization, in which the offer of a district in British East Africa for a Jewish settlement was crystallized, reference was made to "the interest which His Majesty's Government must always take in any well-considered scheme for the amelioration of the position of the Jewish race." The general terms of the British Government's offer were then laid down. They comprised "the grant of a considerable area of land, the appointment of a Jewish official as the chief of the local administration, and permission to the Colony to have a free hand in regard to municipal legislation and as to the management of religious and purely domestic matters."

That this most generous offer was not merely an isolated incident, but one event in the full stream of Britain's historic tradition, is not only a matter of common knowledge to all who have given thought to the relationship between Great Britain and the Jews. That which has gone before and also that which has happened subsequently go to show that throughout modern history Great Britain has been consistently sympathetic towards Jewry and Jewish

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ideals. The latest link in the Anglo-Jewish chain is the strongest. It shows how, after the turn of centuries, history in accordance with the adage repeats itself, how Britain to-day occupies the position of Persia in the days of Cyrus and of Ezra, how through the agency of Great Britain we, the Jews, are once more on the threshold of our ancient home.

Crowning the work and aspirations of two and a half centuries the British Government announces, for the information of the world, that they "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object." Britain's single-hearted friendship for the Jews is of long standing, centuries old. And world-Jewry's gratitude is equally well founded and well justified.

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