

AN ODD COUPLE: Hodgkin and Montefiore

In 2005 I led a small group on a study trip to Israel. The idea was to visit obscure places that had some connection to Jewish medical history and to discuss how and why while present at the site. One of the most memorable venues was an austere church graveyard in Jaffa that was overgrown with weeds and surrounded by high walls. We had come to pay homage at the grave of Dr. Thomas Hodgkin, the famous British pathologist, who died in 1866 while accompanying his long-time friend and patient Sir Moses Montefiore. For security reasons, I needed to get special permission to enter the small cemetery which is located on the grounds of the Tabeetha School for Girls. What follows here describes the two men's remarkable relationship.



The two Brits were an odd couple: Moses Montefiore: Observant Jew, 6'3" tall, debonair. He drank a bottle of port every day until he was 99 — and lived to 101. Thomas Hodgkin: Devout Quaker, small and slight, dour and poor, Perhaps they shared a sense of kinship because both came from persecuted minorities. Both men respected each other's religious beliefs, were philanthropic to the core and passionately concerned for the oppressed and disadvantaged. The Jewish and Quaker traditions each valued charity and each man was willing to endure discomfort and travel great distances for the sake of others. They've sometimes been described as "active idealists."

Thomas Hodgkin (1798-1866) was the most prominent British pathologist of his time. In 1832, as a young prosector at Guy's Hospital in London, he described the features of six cases of lymphadenopathy and splenomegaly which characterized the disease that was named after him only a year before his death — later three of the cases were said to have been misdiagnosed. Although he had a brilliant scientific career, Hodgkin also had a genius for the politically incorrect which hampered his professional advancement. He wore black clothes, addressed colleagues as "thee" and "thou" and was casual about sending bills. As a Quaker Hodgkin championed the causes of what he called "the feeble races." These included Australian aborigines, New Zealand Maoris and North American Indians. During our Civil War he supported abolitionist attempts to free the slaves and return them to Africa. Ever the humanitarian, Hodgkin treated hundreds of poor Jews in London clinics. As a niece recalled: "I think the Aborigines & the Jews took first place in his heart. He was much beloved by the Jews in the East End of London, & well known in the poor quarters there, where he continually attended them without charge."

Moses Montefiore (1784-1885) was born in Leghorn, Italy of Sephardic background. He was brought up in England where he had only a limited education but as a young adult he earned a fortune as a broker for his relatives by marriage, the Rothschilds. He was made Sheriff of London and was the first Jew to be knighted by Queen Victoria. He was so successful in business that he was able to retire at age 40 to devote his next six decades to philanthropy. Montefiore served as an unofficial roving ambassador for Jews wherever they were in trouble: Russia, Rumania, Morocco, Syria, Palestine. He seemed to enjoy playing the role of patriarch and news of injustice anywhere galvanized him to action - not only for Jews, but for persecuted Christians or Muslims as well. Sir Moses became a legend throughout the entire Jewish world in his own lifetime. He was respected by kings and potentates and venerated by impoverished Jews in the shtetls of Eastern Europe and villages of North Africa and the Middle East.

On most of his trips abroad, Sir Moses was accompanied by his wife Judith; they observed Shabbat wherever they were, maintained dietary laws and even brought their own ritual slaughterer with them. They traveled by carriage, sedan chair, sailboat, camel and by foot during a time when pirates, wars and diseases made travel dangerous. On their first trip to Jerusalem in 1827, it took the Montefiores and their servants five and a half months to reach Jerusalem and when they finally arrived, exhausted by the slow final ascent by horseback, they were appalled at their first sight of the ruined Holy City. They found fifty Portuguese families and forty Ashkenazim and nearly 200 elderly widows all of whom were in great distress. There were open sewers, piles of rubbish, decomposing dead animals, non-existent medical care and malaria, typhoid, cholera and leprosy were endemic. They stayed for only three days and did what they could, but were advised not to make donations to the community lest Turkish officials learn of it and raise taxes or extort money, but his many contributions have been extensively chronicled elsewhere.

Dr. Hodgkin served as personal physician for Montefiore on five extended trips abroad; twice to the Holy Land, the first in 1857 on the fifth of Montefiore's seven trips there, and again on that fatal trip in 1866 when Hodgkin was nearly 68 and Sir Moses was 80. Four years earlier, while Lady Montefiore was terminally ill, she made Hodgkin promise to accompany her husband on all future trips, both as a friend and physician. But this time when Montefiore called, it was the doctor who was in frail health. He reasoned though that he might benefit from a warm climate and agreed to travel. When they reached Alexandria, Hodgkin already was suffering from severe diarrhea but they sailed on to Jaffa. By then it was clear that he couldn't continue and Montefiore was persuaded to go on alone lest he be late for Passover in the Holy City. He reluctantly left his friend in the care of a local physician and two servants but Hodgkin deteriorated rapidly and died, probably from cholera.

Thomas Hodgkin was buried in "the English cemetery" just outside the city walls, and afterward an attending official wrote to his wife:

The doctors did all they possibly could, and there was no lack of anything for his comfort...But alas! The malady was so virulent that it prostrate him and carried him off.

Hodgkin's last letter to his wife:

The last two days in Alexandria knocked me up; the weather was oppressive, I have been in almost ceaseless agony, tenesmus, delirium, gasping have worn me down.

Dear Sir Moses was obliged to leave me to go to Jerusalem but he has been boundless in his kindness and spared nothing for my relief.

Sir Moses' diary note:

He breathed his last in a land endeared to him by hallowed reminiscences. To one so guileless, so pious, so amiable in life, so respected in his public career, and so desirous to assist with all his heart in the amelioration of the condition of the human race, death could not have had any terror.

A friend's eulogy:

His strong sympathy with his fellow man of all climes and colors rendered Dr. Thomas Hodgkin's name familiar to high and low; and his hand was ever out to aid those who were least capable of returning his generosity.

After Montefiore returned to England, he purchased a granite column from which a simple obelisk was fashioned. On the front Hodgkin's "deeply sorrowing widow and brother" recorded their "irreparable loss.":

Here rests the body of
THOMAS HODGKIN, M.D.
of Bedford Square, London
A Man distinguished alike for Scientific
Attainments, Medical Skill
And self-sacrificing philanthropy
He died in Jaffa, the 4th of April, 1866
In the 68th year of his Age
In the Faith & Hope of the Gospel

Sir Moses had these words inscribed on the opposite side:

*In commemoration of a friendship of more than 40 years
And of many Journeys taken together
In Europe, Asia and Africa.*

Montefiore returned for his last journey to Palestine at age 92. His route preceded from India to Paris and Turin and then by steamer to Port Said. From there he sailed on an Austrian vessel to Jaffa and when he finally arrived, Sir Moses revisited the cemetery to pay final respects to his "much-lamented friend." He wrote, "It was a melancholy

occasion and made me remember all those virtues by which the departed was so preeminently distinguished during his life.” He ordered an iron railing to be installed around the grave “for better preservation of the ground,’ but for decades afterward, there were no other known visitors and the cemetery was neglected, weed-covered and forgotten.

In 1927, after much inquiry and searching, Dr. Emanuel Libman of New York City’s Mount Sinai Hospital located Hodgkin’s tomb and arranged for a small group of Christian, Moslem and Jewish notables to visit and pay homage. Libman lay a wreath “In the names of the members of the medical profession, not simply as physicians, but as citizens of the world, for the benefit of which he strove and died.” But during the next two decades the region was marked by civil disorder and was unsafe to visit. In 1950, Dr. Hyman Morrison of Boston rediscovered it and in 1966, on the 100th anniversary of Hodgkin’s death, a symposium was held in Israel and members of the British Medical Society raised funds to repair the monument.

Today the untended cemetery can be entered only through the Church of Scotland Tabeetha School’ for Girls’’ locked grounds. The school had been founded in 1863 by two Scottish women in order to provide education to young girls of all faiths - Christians, Jews and Muslims — and now it has more than 300 students. Tabeetha was described in the New Testament as a woman of good works who was dedicated to promoting understanding and harmony. So this quiet cemetery is an appropriate final resting place for a modest Quaker physician whose life was dedicated to perfecting the world.

By the time Sir Moses reached age 98, his days of travel were at an end, but he still was ready to go anywhere at any time. When he heard of the horrors which followed the assassination of the Emperor Alexander II of Russia, he demanded to be allowed to go to St. Petersburg to see the new Emperor and do something to stem the tide of persecution. “Take me in my carriage to the train, put me on board ship, then again on the train, and then in St. Petersburg I will be carried into the presence of the Emperor. Nothing shall prevent me from serving my unfortunate brethren if I can be of use to them.” On his 99th birthday he was delighted to receive a congratulatory telegram from Queen Victoria. When he reached 100, the once more there was a telegram from the queen: “I wish to renew my sincere congratulations to you on this day, which marks the completion of a century of loyalty and philanthropy.”

It should be no surprise that when Sir Moses died at age 101, it was far grander than his friend’s humble churchyard. He was buried at his home in Ramsgate beside his wife

Judith beneath a mausoleum that he'd built for her in the style of Rachel's tomb in the Holy Land. He was wrapped in the prayer shawl in which he'd been married and had left instructions that he wanted "to be carried to my last resting place beside my wife, quietly and by the way [that] she and I always walked to our synagogue."

Footnote:

As Sir Moses' 100th birthday approached, Jewish institutions throughout the world wished to honor the famous philanthropist — and not always for selfless reasons. Leaders of the former "Jews Hospital" in New York City, by now called Mount Sinai Hospital, were about to open a chronic disease hospital and decided that it would be nice gesture to name it for Moses Montefiore in the hope that he might remember their kindness in his will. Indeed, the new facility was called Montefiore Hospital and they didn't have to wait long for his largesse. It was a bronze bust of the great man that could be publicly displayed in the lobby — nothing more. I'm told that it still can be seen there today.