

## *Benjamin Disraeli*

By Adam Kirsch

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### Review by Harry A. Ezratty

Question: How did a disgruntled father, resigning from London's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue over a perceived slight by its Board of Directors, change English history?

Answer: In 1817, in a fit of pique, Isaac D'Israeli allowed a friend to arrange for his son, Benjamin, to be baptized in the Anglican Church. This act qualified Benjamin Disraeli (he changed his last name by dropping the apostrophe between the D and the I) to become a Member of Parliament. Not until 1858 were Jews permitted to hold office in Parliament. Until then all prospective office holders were required to take an oath "on the true faith as a Christian."

The baptized son became a Member of Parliament in 1837. By 1875, as England's Prime Minister, he purchased shares in the Suez Canal on behalf of his government, insuring Great Britain's entry as a political power in the Middle East and facilitating a swifter, safer route to colonial India and England's other possessions in the Far East. The shares were bought with a loan from the House of Rothschild. The next year Disraeli had Parliament bestow upon Queen Victoria the title, Empress of India.. Disraeli was also responsible for pushing electoral reforms and other social welfare legislation.

Adam Kirsch, author of *Benjamin Disraeli*, performs a great service by giving his readers an innovative psychological insight into one of the 19th century's most fascinating politicians. Kirsch's work delves deeply into Disraeli's awareness of his Jewish heritage, how he dealt with it and how he was seen by his peers. Any actor who, in the future, undertakes to portray Disraeli on stage or screen needs to read this book to understand what motivated this great statesman.

From the outset of this well written book, Kirsch makes it clear that while Disraeli was technically a Christian, he was always thought of as a Jew by his contemporaries and was probably the most notable one in the British Empire. I have longed subscribed to the principle that if you are recognized as a Jew by the public at large, then you are one. Most of this book explains how a converted Jew, who was snubbed by England's upper-class society, managed to navigate their world, finally beating them at their own game by becoming Prime Minister (despite those in power vowing they would never accept a Jew as such) and then knighted The Earl of Beaconsfield.

Kirsch notes there are many biographies of Disraeli. Most only cursorily discuss his early years and baptism, then go on to cover his careers as novelist and politician. They barely touch on the effect of his Jewishness on his life's work. Two of those biographies sit on the shelves of my personal library. The first, Robert Blake's, *Disraeli* was published in England in 1966 and is an excellent account of Disraeli's life but slight with respect to his religion. The other, Stanley Weintraub's, *Disraeli: A Biography*, is an exception to the rest, touching heavily on Disraeli's Jewishness. It was published in 1993. Should anyone doubt Disraeli was always conceived of as a Jew, then the Blake and Weintraub books will dispel that idea. They are filled with vicious cartoons from respectable English publications such as *Punch*, depicting Disraeli as the "Old Clothes Man," a grasping moneylender, an outsider robed like an Arab, and always the foreigner with a hooked nose. One *Punch* cartoon even depicts Disraeli as Dickens' odious teacher of juvenile thieves — Fagin.

Born December 21, 1804, Disraeli was duly circumcised as any newborn male Jewish babe. His uncle, David Abarbanel Lindo, acted as mohel. Isaac D'Israeli must have been on good terms with his synagogue at the time because it was arranged to have Elijah's chair transported from the synagogue to his home for use in the service. As a young student, Benjamin received special Jewish instruction at his private school while fellow pupils were studying the basics of Christianity.

Four months short of his Bar Mitzvah, Benjamin was led to the baptismal font. There is some evidence that he may not have been a willing participant. The baptism resulted after his father Isaac declined to serve as *parnass* at the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue. According to the rules then in force, refusal was met with a fine which Isaac refused to pay, firing off his resignation from the congregation instead. Although he had all of his three children baptized, Isaac D'Israeli remained a Jew for the rest of his life. The D'Israeli household was far from religious. Mother Miriam insisted on being called Mary or Maria. Isaac, a literary celebrity and author of several successful reference books, cared little for his religion as did his mother who constantly lamented being born a Jew.

At age 19, Benjamin changed his name from D'Israeli to Disraeli. Later in his career, when he became a champion of extending the voting franchise and other social welfare laws, working class Englishmen who could not properly pronounce his name affectionately called him "Dizzy."

How did Benjamin Disraeli, a converted Jew, an outsider novelist who dressed outlandishly, who wore his hair in a careless forelock dangling over his forehead, who would today be deemed a non-conformist, and of whom it was once said, "No Englishman could approach Disraeli without some immediate consciousness that he was in the presence of a foreigner," manage to open the doors to English society, become a Member of Parliament, a powerful and esteemed Leader of the Opposition Party, Prime Minister (Queen Victoria's favorite) and finally, the Earl of Beaconsfield?

Kirsch provides us with his interesting and well-documented answer by emphasizing his Jewish antecedents.

Disraeli was ambitious. Early on he saw himself becoming a member of England's ruling class. But he also understood that upper-class society was based on ancient family lines and as a second generation Englishman of Jewish descent (on his father's side) he hardly fit in. So he manufactured his own aristocracy, based on an apocryphal Jewish ancestry. Disraeli played one better than his English colleagues. He made of Jewishness a race, not a religion. Thus, as far as he was concerned, he was always the racial Jew and could acknowledge his forebears in that way, while emphasizing his religious status as a Christian in order to legally participate in politics. For Disraeli there was no ambiguity. There could be none if he was to achieve his goals in society and politics.

In a phrase often quoted, Disraeli used a line from the playwright Sheridan when asked by Queen Victoria if he were Jew or Christian, "I am," he replied, "the blank page between the Old Testament and the New." Kirsch quotes Disraeli directly in a revealing thought, "I look upon the Church as the only Jewish institution that remains, and, irrespective of its being the depository of divine truth, must ever cling to it as the visible means which embalms the memory of my race."

Kirsch deftly constructs a psychological portrait of this complex man. To embark upon his plan of attaining power, Disraeli invented a Sephardic pedigree without any basis. The D'Israelis, he wrote, are descended from an ancient Spanish Jewish family who trace their origins back to Babylonia; they were squires forced to leave Iberia in 1492. His family was thus older than any of England's nobles. His exiled family finally settled in Venice. Disraeli's grandfather, also named Benjamin, came to England from that city. Upon their expulsion, the family dropped their Gothic name and assumed the name D'Israeli, Benjamin tells us, as if it were some noble title granted by an ancient sovereign.

None of Disraeli's many biographers has ever been able to verify this story. That grandfather D'Israeli came to England from Italy is a fact, but he came from a backwater village called Cento. And it is probable that the family came to Italy from the Middle East or Turkey. The purpose of Disraeli's fiction was to advise his English colleagues that, while he was racially a Jew his family's pedigree preceded those of England's oldest noble families and were themselves equally, if not more distinguished. This would account for keeping his name with its slight modification. To the world it advertised that its owner had a Jewish background. To Disraeli it emphasized his royal attachment to Spain and ancient Israel.

Benjamin's mother had the true Sephardic pedigree he was looking for. He needn't have fabricated one. Not only was she related to the accomplished and wealthy Montefiores, she was a descendant of the distinguished Basevi

and Aboab Cardoso families. Isaac Aboab Cardoso was the last gaon of Castile who in 1492 negotiated the movement of Jewish exiles from Spain to Portugal. She was the fourth generation of her family living in England. That would have been an easier and more truthful bloodline to follow, but for some unknown reason Disraeli did not avail himself of it.

Kirsch also offers a fascinating portrait of the most revealing features of Disraeli's self image: His novels. Before entering politics he enjoyed much success as a novelist. He continued writing all his life. The novels tend to be romantic tales containing many autobiographical nuances. In *Vivian Grey*, his first novel, published anonymously, we see Disraeli's ambition to elevate himself socially and acquire power. Vivian Gray, the book points out, says he "would do anything to get ahead." He even jokes he would sell his soul. Disraeli himself publicly stated that, "My works are the embodiment of my feelings...In *Vivian Grey* I have portrayed my active and real ambition..." In another novel, *Contarini Fleming*, the hero is a genius who realizes that he is better than others in his society and has problems fitting within it Contarini is dark and Mediterranean looking. He is a great contrast to the light-haired, blue-eyed Anglo-Saxons all about him.

*The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* is another eye-opener. Disraeli writes of the real life character, David Alroy who lived in the 12th century and claimed to be a descendant of King David. He fomented a revolt against the Seljuk Turks. When asked by the Sultan "Art thou King of the Jews?" Alroy responds "I am." In truth, he was a false Messiah who promised to lead the Jews back to Jerusalem. The novel was begun on a trip young Disraeli took to Jerusalem. It is a wild, fantastic tale of Jews recovering their dignity and returning to their homeland. It is, says Kirsch, "proto-Zionist."

*Tancred* which also takes place in the Middle East, is another effort to educate the English public to the nobility of the Jewish race. By doing so, Disraeli intended to elevate himself as well. *Endymion*, his last novel, was completed in 1880 and he was working on another, uncompleted, when he died in 1881.

Despite all these efforts, this great man who so influenced Victorian politics was never truly accepted as an Englishman among his own countrymen. Much of his life was dedicated to attaining two goals: reaching the pinnacle of political power, to which he succeeded admirably and educating his countryman to understand the nobility of the Jewish race. In this he was not as successful. Disraeli knew very little of religion, Jewish or Christian. He felt that Christianity was the logical result of Judaism and that Judaism from its beginning was destined to become Christianity. But his second effort was closely allied with the first. Disraeli's rise to power was based on his firm belief that he was not only as good as England's best, but even better. It was the ideological ladder he used to climb to the top and become accepted in the eyes of others. In the course of his interesting journey

he let all the anti-Semitic barbs roll off him, without any bitter retort, but calmly, and with the certain knowledge that his racial background made of him a noble among nobles.

A shadowy figure emerges in three of Disraeli's later novels, *Sybil*, *Tancred* and *Conningsby*. He is Sidonia, whose physical description Kirsch informs his readers, is "point for point the way strangers always described Disraeli himself." Sidonia is a fabulously wealthy Jew cut off from the world around him. He uses his vast wealth to operate beneath the surface of international, public, political and financial activities; a deft manipulator who holds no elected office, yet wields great power among many nations. Disraeli describes Sidonia's power and influence succinctly: "He was lord and master of the money-market of the world and of course lord and master of virtually everything else." There is a modern tone to this. Sidonia is the forerunner of those wealthy international financiers who are today so influential in moving the world's money around.

Sidonia is a Marrano (secret Jew) who finally leaves Spain in the early 1800s (coincidentally the time of Disraeli's birth) and now publicly professes his Judaism, thus linking his family history to one similar to Disraeli's. Sidonia echoes Disraeli's belief that Jews are a race. He says, "A few centuries back Englishmen were tattooed savages." But Jews are a pure race, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, who have over time allowed themselves to become mixed. And like Disraeli, Sidonia could never be insulted. Sidonia would always be welcomed in upper-class English circles because of his attributes: immense wealth, social knowledge, superior intellect, good manners short of familiarity, and love of field sports, all qualities Disraeli aspired to attain.

One has to wonder what fires burned in the belly of this political genius that he so needed to be accepted by a society which openly rejected him. He disregarded their taunts and went ahead with his life's goals despite the slurs. The winners, aside from Disraeli, were the British Empire and Europe's Jews who were simultaneously emerging from centuries of oppression into an age of enlightenment. They could point to one of their own who had succeeded despite formidable barriers. Unfortunately, almost a century later, a malevolent dictator would subscribe to Disraeli's theory that Jews were a race and that there were some among them who were dark and shadowy figures manipulating international finance.

Adam Kirsch has done a remarkable job of explaining Disraeli's history and psyche to his readers. I have but one complaint. This book cries out for an index.