

Cromwell, Charles II, and the Jews

by Antonia Fraser, 1980

I should like to begin this evening with a sweeping generalisation: This is it: no two successive rulers have had such disparate characters as Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector, and Charles II, the King. I make this generalisation, having studied both their characters at length — and written about them at considerable length— over a period of ten years of my life: But most schoolchildren would probably agree with it too.

On the one hand we have the Puritan Protector, the iron-clad soldier, the man who made himself King in all but name, or, as we might put it today, dictator, because he could see no other solution to England's parliamentary difficulties. At the same time this was a man who wrestled all his life with his conscience: Cromwell sought in every incident in daily life, be it the outcome of a major battle or the death of a beloved child, one of God's providences, whose meaning had to be sought out, questioned, and interpreted.

On the other hand, we have Charles II, our “pretty witty King” in the cynical Lord Rochester's phrase, who had good qualities such as courage and gratitude and bad ones — cynicism and dissimulation foremost among them — yet no-one would step forward with confidence to say that Charles II actually struggled with his conscience at any point in his life. Such was not the measure of the man.

It is not, however, my purpose to hold the balance between these two gentlemen this evening. Indeed, their very differences make it virtually impossible: Cromwell— with all his faults — one of the greatest Englishmen — and Charles II, with all his, one of the most attractive of our English Kings— the very terms I have used should make the vast gulf between them clear.

No, this evening, I want to draw attention to one trait— not at all well known to the outside world — that they did have in common, which especially commends itself to our admiration this evening. Both Cromwell and Charles II were well-disposed to the Jews in England and can in a sense share the honour of having re-admitted them officially to this country. This evening I would like to examine and compare their respective attitudes — not so much from the point of view of Jewish history, on which subject I can declare without any modesty at all that I am no expert — but

from the point of view of their characters.

Beginning with Cromwell, it should be stressed that by 1653, the year in which he was appointed Lord Protector, there were already various strains of philo-semitic opinion in England. Cromwell himself had a number of highly philo-semitic friends, including such Puritans as Roger Williams, John Sadler and Hugh Peter, and philosophers such as Jan Amos Comenius, who believed that the Jews, officially expelled in 1290, should be first welcomed back to England and then converted to Christianity. These were all men who saw a certain lack of logic in the argument that the Jews should somehow be converted by the English *without* actually being present in England!

Then there were more extreme forces of opinion such as the Fifth Monarchists — millenarists — whose attention being focused on the coming end of the world, believed that the conversion of the Jews played some part in the process by which the fall of Anti-Christ would be ultimately achieved. John Robins the Ranter for example trained himself to reconquer the Holy Land by existing on dry bread, vegetables and water; Thomas Tany taught himself Hebrew and built a small boat to carry himself to Jerusalem; unfortunately, he routed himself via Holland to visit the flourishing Jewish colony there and drowned on the way. We may give a little smile: but these were well-meaning men, even if they were on what we would now call the lunatic fringe.

Then from completely the opposite angle, there were the movements of the Jews themselves. These existed on two levels. First, the Jews themselves had begun to trickle back into England, secretly and unacknowledgedly, ever since the official expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century. Communities — undercover communities — of Marranos grew up in London, Dover and York, with their members passing as Spanish or Portuguese Catholics. Certain of their number used to go to Mass at the Catholic ambassadorial chapels, and even remain uncircumcised, in order to preserve this illusion; at least one secret synagogue existed. Although Catholicism was severely proscribed in England at the time, a series of Catholic queens as well as Catholic ambassadors meant that it was not actually forbidden to be a Catholic, as it was officially forbidden to be a Jew. As we shall see, the use of this cover brought its problems later, but for the time being, it was a useful expedient.

On a very different level, certain Jewish theologians were also contemplating whether a return to England was not essential in order to complete the diaspora of the Jewish people: according to one view, the actual name *Angleterre* denoted the ends of the earth. In particular one Jewish theologian, Menassah ben Israel, long resident in Amsterdam, passionately regarded the resettlement of the Jews in England as a prelude to a glorious new development in his people's history. After the renewed Jewish persecution following the Cossack uprising of Chmielnicki of 1650, Menassah ben Israel saluted England in *Spes Israeli* as the new refuge. In 1651 Menassah ben Israel met the Puritan leader Oliver St. John in Amsterdam: and John Thurloe persuaded him to apply to the Council of State for resettlement. A committee was set up.

There were some xenophobic explosions on the subject in the English newspapers, but the all-powerful Puritans regarded it as more or less foregone conclusion that the Jews would be allowed to return officially, even if the date of the resettlement remained vague, because England itself was facing such acute problems of government at the time.

We now pass on to the period of Cromwell's Protectorate, which lasted nearly five years until his death in September 1658. Now, in view of Cromwell's own providential philosophy, it is interesting to note that he himself was not amongst those who — originally — would have proposed the toleration of the Jewish religion; for that matter he was not in favour of the toleration of Unitarians either; he carried his personal tolerance as far as the Baptists and Anabaptists, whom he allowed into his army, but no further.

Thus, Cromwell's attitude to the Jews was not apocalyptic, although he was interested in the subject of their return, having served on that Committee of the House of Commons set up by Oliver St. John in 1651. Cromwell, for all his conscience-searching, was not in fact a philosopher in action as Lord Protector, and most of his best actions had their basis in pragmatism.

Paradoxically therefore it was not philo-semitism which convinced him of the Jewish right to resettlement but the practical worth of the Jewish community as a whole. Nor was he thinking entirely of the commercial value they brought to England. He also found various Jews excellent and willing secret agents —

‘intelligencers’ as they were known at the time. Above all, they were not troublemakers.

Cromwell, with what he saw as appalling problems of civic unrest and a King over the water, had a highly favourable attitude to any groups of dissenters who were prepared to keep the peace. We also incidentally find him showing a markedly favourable attitude to the English Catholics — practically — when he realized that neither they, nor for that matter their Pope, were backing Charles II. His original attitude to the Quakers was tolerant, and only changed when they persisted in breaking of the peace at Anglican services.

The Jews in his view were ideal citizens, wishing to live at peace, add to the wealth of the community, and also come to the aid of the Protector. Into Oliver Cromwell's strange and rather fascinating dreams of imperial expansion, the Jewish intelligencers fitted admirably.

It was all the sadder then, that at this point the Council of State still rejected the petitions of the Jews for official resettlement. Menasseh ben Israel therefore decided to pay England a visit in order to try and persuade the Council to change its mind. He arrived in September 1655, just before the festival of the Jewish New Year, bringing three Rabbis with him in his train, and in a remarkable break with tradition, instead of staying in the familiar Jewish surroundings in the city, was lodged by the Protector in the Strand, that is to say, near to the protectoral palace in Whitehall. Menasseh ben Israel, a man of enormous charm as well as erudition, came to dine out in London society, encountering such philo-semites as Comenius and Hartlib, and Milton's friend, the hostess Lady Ranelagh.

Yet despite this the Council of State still would not accept the resettlement officially; at the same time there was antisemitic demonstrations against Menasseh ben Israel himself, and also protests against Cromwell for being pro-semitic. William Prynne for example announced that Cromwell had been bribed by Jewish gold to the tune of £200,000 — antisemitic stories do not vary very much down the ages. I don't know whether it was any consolation that the Jews at the same time considered him a possible Messiah: a Jewish investigator went to Huntingdon, the place of his birth, to see if there was anything Jewish in his ancestry — but that story was as baseless as that of the Jewish bribe — if rather more engaging.

All the same, the Council still would not give way. So that it was at this point that Cromwell simply admitted the Jews to England on his personal nod. In late 1655 — John Evelyn wrote in his Diary: “Now were the Jews admitted”, although the actual date was later. As Protector, Cromwell could do this, although he could not make a law: yet as long as he lived, the Jews did not need a law. At the same time Menasseh ben Israel weighed in once more with a long and moving pamphlet *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, providing an answer to many popular accusations against the Jews, including the worship of idols and the ritual murder of Christian children.

The next crisis came in the spring of the following year when war broke between England and Spain. I have mentioned the Marrano merchants, Jews posing as Spanish Catholics. A body of English merchants animated more by financial gain than bigotry, immediately raised an outcry that the Marrano properties should be confiscated on the grounds that they were now enemy aliens. When the goods of one Don Antonio Robles were confiscated on order from the Privy Council, he first tried the ploy that he was Portuguese (Portugal unlike Spain not being at war with England). When that failed, Robles personally petitioned Cromwell as the “protector of afflicted ones” to allow that his property should not be confiscated, because he was a Jew, although he admitted that he was uncircumcised and had attended Catholic chapels i.e., he had deliberately posed as a Catholic. The crucial decision to allow Robles’ petition because he was “a Jew born in Portugal” gave the Jewish merchants the confidence they needed; for the rest of Cromwell’s life, they walked tall, worked as intelligencers, secure in his shadow. Pragmatic to the last, Cromwell had neither allowed them to be expelled, nor forced the Council to clash with him on the subject. In 1657 Samuel Dormidow was the first Jewish member of the Stock Exchange, and by 1660 there were five tombstones in the new Jewish cemetery at Mile End.

But of course, while Cromwell had showed himself the Hope of Israel indeed, there was still no legal decision. On his death in 1658 the Jews, including Menasseh ben Israel, feared for their safety in England all over again. Richard Cromwell, during his short and ineffective period of personal power received personal petitions from English merchants wishing to get rid of their Jewish rivals. On the restoration of Charles II in May 1660, a year and nine months later, these fears rose to an understandable crescendo. For now, the English merchants were able to point to the Jews accusingly as having been given civil rights granted by “the late Usurper”.

Now we turn to the young King Charles II, on whose favour the Jews, in the absence of an unofficial permission, were to be equally dependent. In the 1650s Charles II was outwardly no Catholic, whatever may have been his inclinations twenty years later: on the contrary, he was in public an ostentatious Anglican, terrified of being tarred with the Catholic brush by his enemies, which would probably have meant that he never recovered his throne. As for his inner spiritual life, I would guess that during the same period, that was virtually non-existent. What was important was that Charles II did not believe in any form of philosophy which would bind him against the toleration of any man for sincerely held beliefs. He was not Philo-semitic — but he was not antisemitic either.

As for his character, King Charles II did not have Oliver Cromwell's experience as a leader of men in war, that experience which had predisposed Cromwell towards those who would accept his leadership and live under it in peace. But his character had been formed in an equally hard school, perhaps even harder, that of exile. He had been for fourteen years a penniless refugee in Europe, a humiliated and at times a hunted man. From these wanderings he had emerged cynical, dissimulating, what we should now call a survivor. But he never lost his courage, nor his capacity for gratitude.

It is always delightful and warming to find gratitude practiced by the great. After the Restoration we certainly find it practiced by Charles II: for example, all the people, however humble, who helped him escape after his defeat at Worcester were rewarded. In the same way, Charles II did not forget that there had been Royalist Jews at Amsterdam, and that in September 1656, exactly at the moment when Menasseh ben Israel was crossing the Channel to be entertained at Whitehall as an honoured guest of the Protector, other Jews were giving a loan to the needy King in exile, in return for this promise from Charles II: "When God shall restore us, we shall extend that protection to them which they can reasonably expect and abate that rigour of the Laws which is against them in our several dominions".

On the eve of his Restoration the Declaration of Breda expressed even more strongly the King's general belief in toleration: Charles II promised, via 'an Act of Parliament, a "liberty to tender consciences". No man in future was to be "disquieted or called in question" for differences in religion, so long as these differences did not threaten the peace of the kingdom.

So far, so good: for the Jews as for other dissenters, the auguries seemed promising.

Besides, Charles II, like Cromwell, was discovering for himself the usefulness of members of the Jewish community. In the summer of 1660 General Monck told some leading Jews that there was no point in his being their intermediary with the King since Charles II's good will towards the Jews was already so great that no intermediary was necessary.

In the question of Charles II's marriage to the Portuguese Princess Catharine of Braganza, and particularly her handsome marriage settlement, the Portuguese Jews played a part. The glittering dimensions of this dowry had been outlined to Monck by Augustin Coronel Chacon, the so-called "little Jew" while the King was still in exile. As her portion was about £360,000 cash as well as sundry possessions, the lure to a needy King was immense.

When the Infanta Catharine did arrive in England in May 1662, the Catholic Princess brought at least one Portuguese Jew in her train, Doctor Fernando Mendes da Costa, and when the dowry was not delivered by the Portuguese with that promptitude required by the English, another Portuguese Jew Duarte da Silva was instrumental in the negotiations. Duarte da Silva's experience in this respect was not totally happy. When the dowry was not forthcoming, he was thrown into prison to heighten his sense of responsibility — but that was because the King had already pledged it to the gold-smiths for his debts, not on account of his faith: and in any case he did not immediately declare himself as a Jew on his arrival. At least Chacon was knighted for his services in respect of the marriage.

At the same time the English Jewish community already at Mile End grew and flourished. The secret synagogue in Cree Church Lane from which "mysterious sailings" were said to have come during the Protectoral period, became one of the fashionable sights of London and the ever-curious Samuel Pepys included it on his itinerary. Gentile women also made a nuisance of themselves gaping. Nevertheless, the rivalry— and consequent dislike — of the English merchants remained, and there were certain hostile references in the House of Commons.

Into this atmosphere of tacit acceptance, the Conventicle Act of 1664, part of the general Clarendon Code, came as an unpleasant shock. It should be stressed that the intention of the Conventicle Act was not anti-Jewish. It was in fact aimed specifically at the Protestant dissenters, by prohibiting meetings of five or more persons "under colour or pretense of any exercise of religion". Nevertheless, in this Act the merchants saw their chance: surely this weapon could be used against their

Jewish rivals just as well. One Paul Ruycart whose connection with the Levant Company which endeavored to maintain the monopoly of trade with Turkey made him a special enemy of the Jewish merchants, threatened them — with removal; at which point in an even more discreditable episode, the Earl of Berkshire, son of a distinguished Royalist, the King's former governor, stepped forward and offered to intercede for them. The only catch in the offer was that they would have to come to a speedy financial arrangement with him. In short, it was blackmail.

In their desperation, the Jewish leaders made a very wise decision. They decided to go directly to the King over Berkshire's head. Their petition reminded him of their good behaviour, and asked that they might remain “under the like Protection with the rest of your Majesty's subjects”.

A letter in Hebrew from Rabbi Jacob Sasportas of London to Rabbi Josiah Pardo of Rotterdam describes the encounter. Incidentally this letter, which I quoted in my biography of Charles II, had never previously been published: the original vanished in Berlin in the war and I owe the preservation of its transcription to Professor Tishby of Jerusalem. The Rabbi writes as follows: “Two nobles, being themselves in possession of access to the royal council, approached us purporting to have been given authority over our persons and property. We requested them to give us time, and we apprised the King, who chuckled and spat at the business (literally spat — that is the word used — meaning, however, spat with amusement, hawked as we might put it, not spat at the Jewish leaders) and a written statement was issued from him, duly signed, affirming that no untoward measures had been or would be initiated against us, and that — now he quotes Charles II directly — ‘they (the Jews) should not look towards any protector other than his Majesty: during the continuance of whose lifetime they need feel no trepidation because of any sect that might oppose them, inasmuch as he himself would be their advocate and assist them with all his power’. Blessed be the Lord” ended Rabbi Sasportas. This was a time in England “in which God has seen fit greatly to ameliorate the condition of his people”.

And Rabbi Sasportas was at last right: thanks to Charles II, the English Jews received at last their precious long-sought document from the Privy Council on the 22 of August 1664, by which they were promised the favour they had long had, so long as they demeaned themselves peaceably and quietly “with due obedience to His Majesties’ laws and without scandal to his government”.

And the Jews continued to make good progress with regard to their rights, throughout

Charles II's reign: he granted letters of endenization, that is to say, moderate naturalization, with a generous hand, so that the Jewish community increased and flourished. In 1667 Jews were allowed to give evidence in a court of law, swearing on the Old Testament, and further recognition of their religious status was granted in 1673. In 1677 the venue of a case was deliberately altered so that a Jew did not have to appear on a Saturday; about the same time an endenized Jewish burgher not of England at all but of New York, appealed successfully to the King in Council for protection.

Naturally the Jews did continue to suffer every time there was a general outcry against dissent. The withdrawal of the Declaration of Independence in March 1673 was one such occasion. At the Quarter Sessions at the Guildhall, the following winter, the Jewish leaders were indicted for riot i.e. meeting together for their religion, and a true bill was found against them by a Grand Jury. Once more the Jews petitioned the King who in February 1674 issued an Order in Council to the effect that "Mr. Attorney General do stop all proceedings at Law against the Petitioners".

Various proposals for a ghetto system as had existed before the expulsion were put forward in 1681, which was of course what Menasseh ben Israel had contemplated. But times had changed in the last thirty years and that would have been a retrograde step. The King allowed it to go forward to the Privy Council, where it was immediately dropped, probably on his instructions.

In short, Charles II had proved himself, as Rabbi Sasportas wrote in his report of him: "one appropriate indeed to hold them (the Jews) in a subjection that is itself the essence of liberty". Or as the Jewish historian Cecil Roth put it, to his "good-natured indifference" the Anglo-Jewish community owe so much. It is an interesting fact that where effective toleration is concerned, "good-humored indifference" can do as much, and sometimes more than fierce principle! In fact, it was not Cromwell's famously fierce religious principles in this case which put him on the Jews' side but his lesser-known practical side.

For Cromwell and Charles II, so unlike in so many many ways, were alike in one: and this one quality they shared had the happy effect of bringing about jointly the readmission of the Jews to England. This quality was a shared pragmatism: an interest in people as they were and how they conducted themselves in fact, as opposed to how they might theoretically conduct themselves in a theoretical

situation. It was this happy pragmatism which has caused the name of Cromwell to be blessed ever since. No-one proposed that Charles II, might be the Messiah, although it is worth making the point that owing to his exceptionally dark coloring — derived in fact from his Italian Medici grandmother — satirists described him as the lofty Jew, the son of Kish. Yet without the follow-up of Charles II, and the tolerant atmosphere of immediate post-Restoration England, that re-admission might not have been secured.

It is perhaps a very small link between Oliver Cromwell and Charles Stuart the Second, small that is in size; but I think all of us here present this evening, would agree that it is a very strong one.

Ref: Fraser, Antonia. "Cromwell, Charles II and the Jews." *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, vol. 14, no. 2, Berghahn Books, 1980, pp. 19–24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41442698>.